


GILDED AGE



A sourcebook of politics and influence for
vampire: the masquerade®



GILDED CAGE

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INTRODUCTION: POWER CORRUPTS

For years — since the game's introduction, really — **Vampire** has made much of the Kindred's presence as a hidden force among the mortal world. The Ancients waged their great Jyhad from the shadows, influencing or outright puppeteering nations. Powerful elders commanded branches of governments; ancillae brought whole companies under their sway. Even neonates, or at least those who could, directly controlled individual mortals by subverting their wills and making them dance to their words.

Over the years, though, much has changed. Global plots and blatant "control" don't really suit the tone of the revised edition. Massive conspiracies have given way to greater realism and more focus on the horror of being a vampire. We've forced the Ancients ever more into the shadows while at the same time bringing nightly horror into the very havens of the Damned.

Still, the vampire as a mastermind is a popular conceit, and certainly still a vital part of the genre. The Camarilla, hiding as it does among mortal society, has no choice but to involve itself with the breathing world,

taking what it wants or needs and redirecting curious eyes away from their undead selves. The Sabbat claims to scorn mortals, but the truth of the matter is that the kine are too damn useful to get rid of entirely, and they outnumber the Sword of Caine by several orders of magnitude, posing a very real threat to its Cainites. Even putting matters of sect aside, those older than the Camarilla and Sabbat pull the strings they've managed to hold, and the Jyhad that takes place independent of sect allegiance does so behind the veil of its own Masquerade. Influence and manipulation are the methods of Jyhad, certainly as much so as outright violence.

The key question is *how*. How do centuries-dead elders garner enough power to sway politics? How can a Kindred who never shows his face by the light of day manage to pay the rent on his haven? How does the endless social war of back-and-forth prestatation and status play out if its players cannot reveal what they are to the "soldiers" they command in the "field"?

This book answers these questions. Consider it a primer in the fine arts of treachery, a handbook to

double-dealing and an invaluable aid in keeping one's own unlife intact while screwing the hell out of everyone else.

UNLIFE IN THE MODERN NIGHTS

In many ways, this book epitomizes the changes between the revised edition and earlier editions. Take a look at some earlier-edition material. Elders wield tyrannical power, hiding only from oblivious mortals while lording their unholy might openly over those in their thrall. Entire businesses, whole branches of the media, existed at the whim of these scheming Kindred. Chances were that any action any Kindred took might well be due to a century of instrumentation leading up to that very choice.

In the revised edition, though, the Kindred must be subtle. Even the great Antediluvians can't simply dream one of their torpid dreams and set legions of minions raging against their venerable foes. A president of a country might well be the catspaw of a slumbering Methuselah, but it's more likely that such a Methuselah has a variety of unsuspecting agents waiting in the wings rather than a slavishly devoted pawn sitting in the spotlight. In the revised edition, vampires rarely "control," because such a tactic draws attention. Rather, they "influence," enacting their will not so much by executive decree as by quiet pressure and slow accommodation.

Consider it in concrete terms. If the president of a global communications corporation who was secretly the Dominated servant of an Ancient suddenly decided to cut off communications with, say, Japan because his master wished it, questions as to his motivations would arise. If the thrall knew of his master, he'd point curious parties directly to the sleeping Kindred. If he didn't know he was being Dominated, or chose to keep it a secret, he'd be voted out of power by an extremely suspicious board of directors. Either way, the Masquerade would seem less believable — if all these powerful people are the mindless minions of one eldritch power or another, why hasn't anyone caught on yet? Moreover, where is the sense of free will that makes the moral struggle of the game so central? Such sweeping submission to invisible powers makes the actions of any player's character meaningless in the big picture, and it makes the contribution of the mortals in the world irrelevant — which threatens the credibility of the Masquerade as a storytelling concept.

Throughout this book, then, you'll find examples to the contrary. Sure, a vain Ventrue may claim that he controls the local steel industry, but he's just inflating his claim. In truth, he probably maintains very delicate relationships with people influential in local steel, whether by blackmail, bribery, other pressure or even simply common goals.

Elders with dupes dancing on strings and Kindred who have completely suborned specific people in power — these are metaphors and no more. They're colorful talk, ways for the harpies to aggrandize the latest subject of their doting, boasts of Kindred who may indeed be very influential but are in no way modern lords of the night in anything other than a poetic sense. Sometimes Kindred really can make puppets of mortals, but this is so rare and so precarious that those who manage them probably don't realize what liabilities they are. Indeed, as yet another self-proclaimed "controller" of this, that or the other makes her way onto the scene, the true masters of the Jyhad merely nod and smile, knowing that it's only a matter of time before such a short-sighted creature exposes herself and incurs the wrath of her "pawns," if not a righteous witch-hunter or more discreet Kindred. Influence and power are tools of subtlety, not hammers with which unsophisticated Cainites might flatten their rivals.

THE OBJECTIVE

The purpose of *The Gilded Cage* is to encourage players and Storytellers to think about the specifics of their characters' influence. The text makes many references to the "political" game, and that's indeed what a war of influence is. Politics is not always governmental, though it can be. Politics is the use of intrigue in gaining power. Politics can be as simple as a smile given upon meeting another Kindred — is the smile intended to disarm? Is it a genuine expression of affection for a fellow? Is it a betrayal of the pleasure that he thinks he can take when he strips you of your assets and claims your title?

That said, any chronicle has a place for some degree of politics. A Storyteller can use politics to emphasize the untrustworthiness of a prince. Players' characters by their very nature can employ politics to extract everything they can from Kindred society. The months or years leading up to a Sabbat siege are a fine opportunity for low politics and high treachery; presenting one's childe at a salon or bucking the Toreador primogen are opportunities for high politics and low treachery. Each is an opportunity for either and both, and the savvy will realize that no difference exists between them other than in who's telling the tale.

Remember that as you go forward with your Vampire chronicle, whether you're a Storyteller using politics to build your plots or a player looking to have her character make her place in the world. Think of the "how" and you'll create a million more opportunities for great stories, in addition to making the game deeper with detail and more believable by adopting the concrete instead of abstracts.

THEME AND MOOD

The Jyhad can never be won before Gehenna itself come about or is incontrovertibly averted. It is an endless game of one-upmanship, a war of resource accumulation, a holy crusade to rid the world of one's ideological enemies. Whether or not a given Kindred appreciates the Jyhad as the ultimate test of a vampire's mettle or the depredation of malaise-maddened Ancients, it is nonetheless an ever-present part of Kindred existence.

That is the theme of **The Gilded Cage**, that the Kindred *must* play a part in the Jyhad, whether they wish to or not. Even an iconoclastic anarchist validates the Jyhad by acknowledging it in his refusal to accept its terms. For many more of the Damned, however, simply choosing not to participate isn't the way to spend one's eternal nights in any sense of comfort. The cities themselves are the Kindred's gilded cages; they are trapped there by the horrors that lurk outside. As such, many of the undead have chosen to make their stay in the cities as comfortable as possible, interesting themselves with the ubiquitous Jyhad and gleaning pleasure and comfort where they can.

The mood of **The Gilded Cage** is one of resigned desperation. Because the Kindred have no choice but to play the game, their stake in it is all the greater. Their own unives are the ultimate price. One cannot rest upon his laurels, or one will rapidly find those laurels seized in another Cainite's bid for power.

For the Kindred, the world is ugly, made all the more so by the approach of rumored Gehenna. It is that dire situation that makes any success all the more valuable.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND HEREIN

Much of this book is written in the first person. While we didn't want to make the book a collection of "artifacts," we did want to impart the sense of subjectivity that **Vampire** thrives upon. It's up to individual Storytellers to decide how efficacious the tactics contained within are. A book of infallible schemes would not only be boring, it would run counter to **Vampire's** themes of paranoia and struggle with others as well as oneself.

Chapter One: The Business at Hand discusses how the Kindred can make a place for themselves — or put others out — in the world of modern corporate culture.

Chapter Two: Social Climbing observes the Damned's unbreakable attachment to the social elite. It

also takes a look at society from its lowest vantages, as well as from the perspective of those outside it.

Chapter Three: On Matters of Governance explores the Kindred's connection to the world of government and diplomacy.

Chapter Four: The Streets considers unlife and influence among the "forgotten" tiers of society as well as the seedy criminal underside of city life and unlife.

Chapter Five: Outside the Box accounts for "everything else," or other realms in which influence can be cultivated.

Chapter Six: Pulling the Strings gives Storytellers advice on implementing all of this advice into their stories, how to challenge players with influence and politics, and how to reward them for their own clever schemes.

Without further ado, on to the main event.

HOW TO TAKE WHAT YOU WANT

A Kindred's Guide to Fucking the Elders at Their Own Games

By Anonymous

If they find this on you, you're in big trouble. If you get the chance, stick my little primer in a Nosferatu's pocket and point at him when the Toreador and Ventrue raise their eyebrows at you. Accuse him of distributing anti-elder propaganda. Better yet, don't get caught.


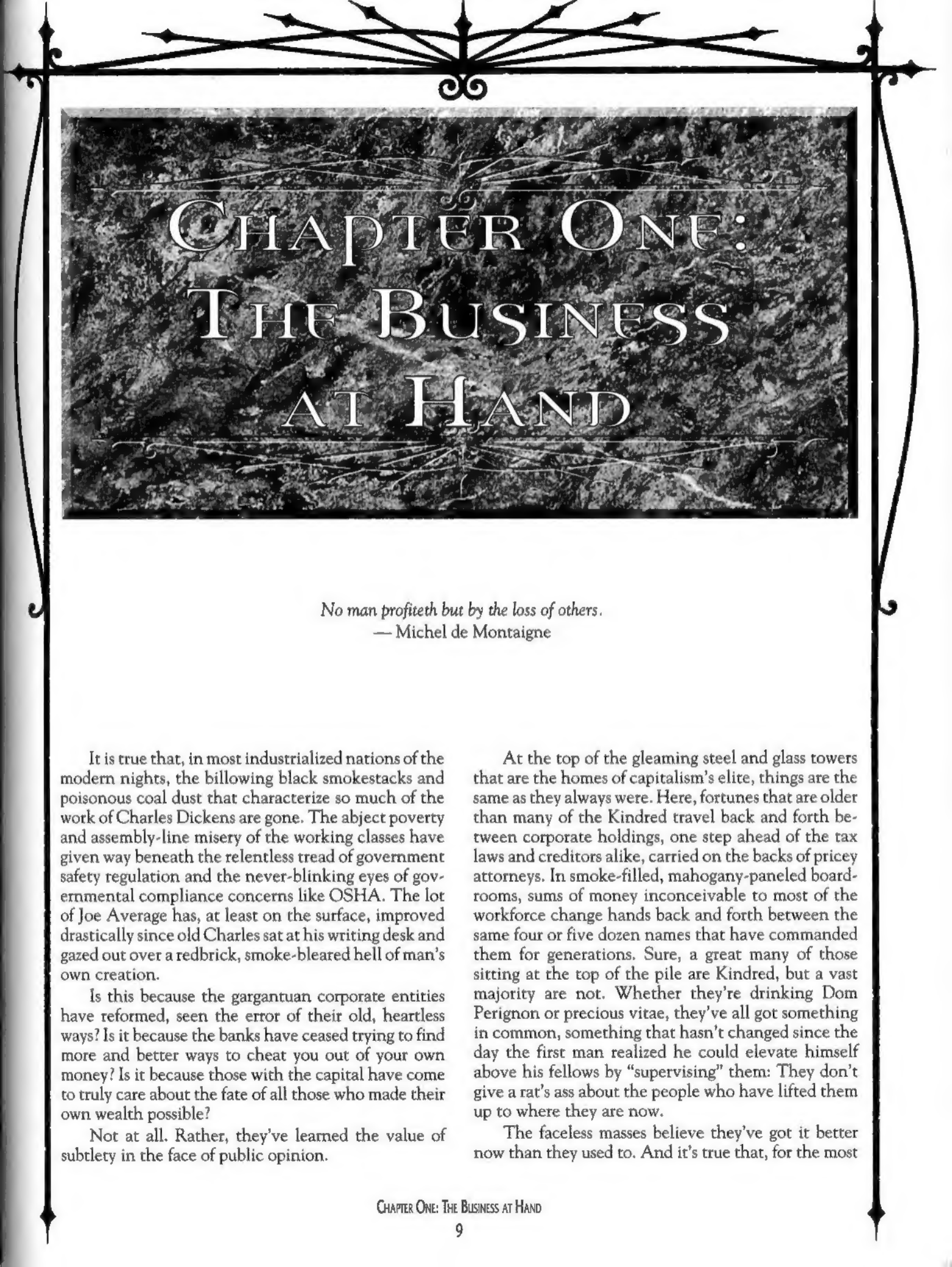
Oh, and a note for you less sophisticated clans: This stuff works for you, too. In fact, you probably have an edge that Ventrue, Toreador and Tremere neonates don't. Most elders are set in their ways and won't suspect you, particularly if you don't look the part.

A lot of this is going to sound bitter. I can't help that. It's also going to sound like the Kindred are everywhere. While that's true in one sense of the word — we've worked ourselves into most aspects of mortal life — don't forget that they probably outnumber us by a good hundred thousand to one. The governments of the world and director's boards of enormous corporations aren't all made up of Kindred. You can bet, though, that at the very least, someone on that board of directors probably has one Kindred in his Rolodex. Exactly what the nature of their relationship is varies wildly — maybe the board member attended one of the Kindred's parties eight years ago — but where there's power, some Kindred wants it.

Trust me. I know what I'm talking about.

Let's begin.





CHAPTER ONE: THE BUSINESS AT HAND

No man profiteth but by the loss of others.
— Michel de Montaigne

It is true that, in most industrialized nations of the modern nights, the billowing black smokestacks and poisonous coal dust that characterize so much of the work of Charles Dickens are gone. The abject poverty and assembly-line misery of the working classes have given way beneath the relentless tread of government safety regulation and the never-blinking eyes of governmental compliance concerns like OSHA. The lot of Joe Average has, at least on the surface, improved drastically since old Charles sat at his writing desk and gazed out over a redbrick, smoke-bleared hell of man's own creation.

Is this because the gargantuan corporate entities have reformed, seen the error of their old, heartless ways? Is it because the banks have ceased trying to find more and better ways to cheat you out of your own money? Is it because those with the capital have come to truly care about the fate of all those who made their own wealth possible?

Not at all. Rather, they've learned the value of subtlety in the face of public opinion.

At the top of the gleaming steel and glass towers that are the homes of capitalism's elite, things are the same as they always were. Here, fortunes that are older than many of the Kindred travel back and forth between corporate holdings, one step ahead of the tax laws and creditors alike, carried on the backs of pricey attorneys. In smoke-filled, mahogany-paneled boardrooms, sums of money inconceivable to most of the workforce change hands back and forth between the same four or five dozen names that have commanded them for generations. Sure, a great many of those sitting at the top of the pile are Kindred, but a vast majority are not. Whether they're drinking Dom Perignon or precious vitae, they've all got something in common, something that hasn't changed since the day the first man realized he could elevate himself above his fellows by "supervising" them: They don't give a rat's ass about the people who have lifted them up to where they are now.

The faceless masses believe they've got it better now than they used to. And it's true that, for the most

part, the physical dangers of the job have deteriorated somewhat in severity, with carpal tunnel syndrome and repetitive strain injuries taking the place of the slightly more incapacitating dismemberment and Black Lung disease that were the risks of the trade in days gone by. Row upon row of carbon-copy desks, perhaps with the illusion of privacy afforded by a veneer-over-particle board cubicle, have replaced the steam-filled, sweat-soaked factory floors — not for all, of course, but for the average white-collar employee.

But if this new setup provides a safer work environment for the body, it fails to accomplish the same service for the mind and soul. Dulled by year after year of endless, unrelenting *sameness*, the minds of the drones that used to be individuals simply become that much more susceptible to suggestion, without even the need for that extra edge wielded by the Kindred. They become simply cogs in the machine, a machine that grinds ever onward, its only purpose to make even more for those who already have it all.

It's no wonder the Kindred have such an affinity for the corporate sector; the damn thing's as dead as they are.

Of course, saying that the Kindred compete in "business" is like telling someone you're traveling "overseas." It may be technically accurate, but it doesn't give much in the way of detail. In order to understand how to take power, you must understand those who already have it. What follows, then, are recommendations on how to begin the struggle to carve out your character's own little niche, techniques for prying loose some prime "domain" for your own benefit. Once you know how to take what you want, you can pick and choose the industries and arenas you wish to play with; some of these, along with a partial listing of what gains they can provide and what you might accomplish with them, are also presented below.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

While there are many ways to get your foot in the door of the corporate sector — mortals do it all the time, after all — it's exceedingly difficult to obtain any real power when you're trying to make your place above the ground floor. Owning two percent of a company's stock may bring in a bit of income, but it's not going to go very far in gaining you a voice (let alone dictatorial power) in the company's direction. Acquiring more, though, is a grueling, arduous process, one that's going to earn you far more than your share of powerful enemies and attention before the night is over.

Never forget that while the elder Kindred already in place have a heavy cache of advantages to draw on, you possess your own; don't be afraid to use them.

THE ADVANTAGES OF YOUTH

The elders have more money than you, they have more experience than you, they have more lackeys than you, and they have a lot more to lose than you. If you're going to foster any hope of succeeding, you must to figure out what you have that they don't — and figure it out fast.

THE INTERNET

This is definitely the best weapon in your arsenal. Most elders won't even look a computer in the eye, let alone check or trade their stocks on one of the magic boxes. While your rival listens to his lackeys' daily reports, you're already point-and-clicking on Ameritrade. He's waiting for his ghouls to check into that corporate buyout he read about in the paper; you're already skimming the news services at the Motley Fool to find out exactly who did what to whom, how much they made, and how you can turn this to your advantage. The Internet not only enables you to learn what happened before your elders do, but react to it more quickly as well. Don't be afraid to act fast; it's the only way you'll get ahead.

While this is a weighty advantage, you'll find yourself somewhat restricted in what you can truly accomplish with the Internet. Reacting to new information quickly is all well and good, but it's helpful only if the information itself is worthwhile. Finding out that nothing has changed doesn't do you any good, no matter how quickly you happen to receive that particular news bulletin. Only rarely is your ability to react fast going to gain you more than a few slivers of stock in a corporate or financial institution. While the high-tech start-up companies don't have the unbreakable glass ceiling of old money holding the neonates down, they also don't have the technophobic old vampires favoring them; the kine in charge are going to be up on the same technologies and techniques that you are. Be ready to use these magical mystery tools you've been granted by the information age — but don't count on them alone to save your ass.

While we're on the subject of the Internet, remember that some of those elders who have been talked into computerizing their records haven't yet fully grasped the need for security. If you, or your pet hacker, can find a back door into your rival's records, don't for one minute be afraid to arrange a bit of sabotage, or at least a little insider trading.

THINK GLOBALLY

Most of your rivals are still dwelling in a time, or at least a mindset, in which national and international barriers were far more concrete than they are tonight. With phones, the Internet and a global

economy, you have markets open to you that your competitors haven't even considered. Can't seem to get things up and running where you are? Accumulate stock in corporations based in Taiwan. Come back at your local rival later, when you've got more of a power base to stand on. This does more than enable you to tap into resources other Kindred in your area haven't considered; it also gives you access to allies they would never work with. If you keep your power base local, your rivals are always going to have some idea who you're working with. If, on the other hand, you've got something shaking in Colombia, Hong Kong or Cuba, they're going to find it that much harder to keep track. Sometimes an unknown ally is more useful than a powerful one.

The key here is to diversify. The fact that your rivals might never consider investing in the Brazilian coffee crop at the same time they were gobbling up stock in Time-Warner doesn't mean that you can't do just that. Which, in fact, brings us directly to...

CROSS INDUSTRIES

Until relatively recently, most large industries tended to be fairly self-contained. Odds are that many of the elders in the corporate sector still see themselves as being dominant in one particular field. A vampire who thinks of his portfolio purely in terms of "the steel industry" is going to be caught flat-footed when, after you've begun to gather influence in pharmaceuticals, you suddenly make a grab at his own holdings as well. Not only does branching out make it harder for the old guard to guess what you're going to do next, it also makes it more difficult for them to cripple your own operations by attacking any specific asset.

In much the same way broadening your geographic sphere can bring unexpected allies into your camp, so can diversifying your industries. After all, the more fields in which you can claim some authority, the more Kindred (at least the younger ones, who haven't themselves diversified their influence already) are going to have to come to you for favors.

TECHNIQUES OF ACQUISITION

While the differences between a corporation and a law firm, or a bank and a hospital, are substantial, the truth is that every major business has certain features in common. The ideas given below don't apply equally to every form of "business" — you cannot, for instance, expect to supply venture capital to a bank — but these techniques are sufficiently wide-ranging that each one applies to multiple sorts of entities. With a little experimentation, you'll learn quickly which techniques work best for which businesses.

OLD AGE AND EXPERIENCE

Youth may indeed have its advantages, but never forget that the elders didn't get where they are by just letting it happen. They have as many advantages as you do — probably more — and they won't hesitate to use every last one of them to bring you down if you so much as look wistfully at their accumulated power.

The elder Kindred have a great deal more experience in defending their property than you do in taking it. Make full use of modern marvels — because unless they don't understand it, they've already figured out how to use it better than you have.

Elder Kindred have many times more resources to throw at you than you do at them. Remember, they're already sitting where you want to be; all the power you imagine you'll be taking from them, they've got right now. They can afford more than you can, they have more people working for them than you do, and they have more Kindred owing them favors. If you're going to do this, hit them hard and fast; as soon as you give them time to react, you're not only dead, you're most sincerely dead.

Never, ever, take on an elder in a fair fight. True, they want to avoid that even more than you do — they have, or believe they have, a lot more to lose. But if it does finally come down to face-to-face contact, you'd better have the numbers on your side. You'll probably lose, of course, but maybe your companions will buy you time to get in a lucky shot, or at least run the hell away. This is a political battle; you'd be better served to keep it that way.

Above all else, keep it contained. At the moment, you've only got the one elder to worry about (as if that weren't enough already). The other Kindred, unless they've established important liaisons with your rival, aren't going to care what happens to him, so long as you leave their piece of the pie alone. Don't ever make the mistake of including your rival's peers in your agenda. Working against one, you have a chance; if you persuade the entire machine to move against you, you might as well give up and go home now. Remember, you're undead. You have plenty of time to deal with the others after you've stabilized your current situation.

BUYING STOCK

It seems almost too simple to point out, but this is the way most kine gain their own influence. Still, while this can work on a small scale, it's exceedingly difficult to take any real power this way. For one thing, most young Kindred don't have an unlimited source of capital to draw on; if they did, they wouldn't have to scabble for resources in the first place. For another, the elders have been playing the game — and the market — since the first moment it existed. They know how to play better than you do.

Still, it's occasionally possible to catch one of them unawares. As we've already indicated, launching a hostile takeover via the Internet, moving with a speed most elders can't begin to comprehend, can sometimes succeed in peeling away a controlling share of a vampire's pet industry. Don't count on this working with any frequency, though. For every success achieved this way, a thousand failures line the same path, in the world of mortals as well as that of the Damned.

If you're trying to gain any real semblance of control by buying stock, you'll have much better odds of success with younger high-tech firms. These tend to have fewer shares of stock on the market, fewer powerful forces interested in buying up or maintaining that stock, and (usually) sell at a lower rate, at least until they truly take off.

Be warned, though, that even though it seems like a great opportunity, buying stock immediately after a company's initial public offering (IPO) is often a dangerous thing. Most companies see their stock rise in the months (or, in some cases, weeks or even a few nights... er, days) immediately following their IPO; but more often than not, they come crashing back down to a more realistic level not long after. Sometimes, finding out *when* a potential gold mine is about to go public is just as vital as having the capital to invest in it in the first place.

The elder Kindred learned long ago never to invest heavily unless it's a sure thing. Don't let yourself be fooled into acting where they know better. At the same time, take advantage of the fact that you may have access to more recent information than they do; look before you leap, but don't let their apparent hesitation alone stop you from grabbing an opportunity when it arises. Remember that these guys won't let go of what they've attained. Sometimes getting there first is the best solution.

VENTURE CAPITAL

This is a technique limited in its application, but quite effective under the proper circumstances. Why worry about trying to take charge of a promising

start-up company when you can cement your position from the ground up? If you provide the seed money for a new venture, you've already got as much influence over the fledgling company as you could possibly want. Threatening to cut off the funds that are keeping a company afloat until its IPO can make people toe the line *real* quick.

The problems with playing the angel investor, however, make this worthwhile only in select cases. Consider the fact that you've got to have the money to invest, so this isn't likely to be your first acquisition. The second is that it only works with relatively new companies, and that really isn't where most of the power is. Still, if the result proves promising enough, it can pay off in spades down the road. Who would have guessed that in its dozen years of existence, AOL would merge with corporate giants a hundred years its elder?

FAVORS AND PRESTATION

The standard coin of Kindred give-and-take, favors and prestation are actually less effective in business than they are elsewhere. It's not all that hard to call in a favor to arrange a meeting with your clan primogen, or to otherwise pull some strings. It's a little more difficult to convince an older Kindred help you become her greatest competitor.

Your single best bet at attaining positive results is by offering your services to protect your elders from others just like you. Become a protégé — take on a mentor. Show them exactly what you can do with your mystic "Internet." Direct their gaze toward that new automotive concern in India, the one that might just threaten their own monopoly in a few scant years. Make them realize just how vulnerable they really are, how little they know about the way things now work — and offer to shield them from it. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Most Kindred are truly averse to giving up any of their hard-won power — but if you can make the old guys understand what they face, they may decide that it's better to give you some of that power now than to risk someone like you taking it all later. Not only does this gain you some measure of power immediately, but it puts you in a perfect position to take advantage of your employer's information and resources for your own ends.

Of course, performing favors and calling in debts are hardly restricted to Kindred interaction. It can be just as effective — often more so — to be owed debts by kine in positions of authority. The world is theirs, after all. The best way to encourage a corporation or other institution to do what you want is to call in a debt owed you by the CEO or other senior members of the board.

The simplest way to place such an individual in your debt is with information. If you've established contact with an executive assistant or data-entry clerk in Corporation A, this grants you some amount of access to that entity's future plans and projects. By selectively passing this information along to certain individuals in Corporation B, you've established yourself as an ally, and one to whom they owe a debt. With the proper amount of care and secrecy, you can turn this into a ladder of favors. Your new contacts in Corporation B now give you information on their projects, which you in turn take to an even higher level of management back at Corporation A. Back and forth, each time rising through the ranks with the importance of your insider information. Cover your tracks; kine aren't all stupid, and if you don't take the proper precautions, someone's going to figure out that the intelligence their rival's been receiving is the same as the information you've been asking about. Still, done properly, this sort of tradeoff can put you on the fast track to having influential figures on each side firmly entrenched in your web of favors and debts.

RUMORS

The stock market is a volatile thing. A word about a corporation's plans and finances whispered in the right ear — particularly when backed up by insider knowledge, perhaps gained by making use of various disgruntled employees — can result in a drop of shareholder confidence as surely as if the company itself had announced an impending bankruptcy suit. Leaking such secrets to the media, rather than directly to the market, not only erodes investor confidence, but the confidence of the public as well. If those rumors come from otherwise unimpeachable sources — for instance, other contacts on Wall Street a given Kindred might already have made — the credibility of a corporation's CEO and board of directors can be utterly demolished in the eyes of the public and the markets.

In and of itself, a rumor campaign isn't likely to drive a company to the point where it becomes an easy, or even viable, target for takeover. But it's a wonderful way to undermine confidence in the current regime; combined with one or more of the other techniques given here, rumors are stepping stones toward greater acquisition.

THE LITTLE PEOPLE

While it's not exactly the most efficient (or most elegant) way to do it, sometimes a corporate structure can be steered in the directions you want it to go simply by suborning the right people on the board of directors. Blackmail, an exchange of favors



as discussed above, even the occasional (and very subtle) judicious use of Dominate, can start you moving in the right direction. This particular technique poses its own risks, though. Your influence in such situations lasts only as long as your people remain in place — and as most Kindred have long since learned, mortals are quite fragile. Furthermore, you risk colliding head on with other Kindred who have the exact same thought. I can imagine nothing more embarrassing — not to mention potentially dangerous — than trying to blackmail a CEO into doing what you want, only to discover that the man you're messing with is the regnant of a Toreador harpy who holds a grudge.

Choose your catspaws and puppets carefully. Sometimes, the obvious choices are the worst. Do you really *want* the company's CEO to be the one who's beholden to you? Sure, it's useful, and he can pull all sorts of strings. But at the same time, most companies long outlast their executive officers — and so will you. Think about it — that's the first example that sprang to your mind and mine. Do you really want your resources arrayed in such plain sight? Won't that lay your skullduggery bare the moment your man does something uncharacteristic?

If you must go for the upper echelons of the company, don't limit yourself to a single powerful individual. Don't take the CEO if you can dig a good solid claw into, say, four or five other members of the board. True, they'll go the way of the dinosaur eventually, but you won't lose all your leverage in one fell swoop, and that gives you time to find new connections.

The truly farseeing Kindred, though, doesn't restrict himself to those at the top. Consider for a moment just how useful the "little people" can be to a "silent" partner.

Janitorial Staff

Easily the most overlooked and underappreciated sector of the workforce, they are by far the most useful for an up-and-coming neonate — often for that very same reason. It is the janitors who have instant and unquestioned access to pretty much anywhere and everywhere. A friend on the janitorial staff can often smuggle you into places that even a Ravnos would have difficulty approaching. They overhear a lot more than they're given credit for, and they have access to the trashcans and shredder bins of entire offices. These people are as invisible as you can get without the use of mystical powers; the larger portions of corporate America have been trained to see through them as though they weren't there. Almost nothing can happen behind the closed doors and tinted windows of Wall Street without the man with the mop learning about it.

The fact that they're almost all drastically underpaid and forced to stare into the depths of luxury on a daily basis doesn't hurt your cause either. Odds are, if you're willing to be even moderately generous with the dead presidents, you'll be able to get any number of them working on your behalf without so much as a single hypnotic suggestion.

Accounting

Whether it's in-house or through an outside firm, most businesses of moderate size and up have a specific department — or at the very least a single individual — responsible for crunching (and, as often as not, playing with) the numbers. From loopholes in the tax code to hidden accounts to proceeds from under-the-table projects, there isn't a corporation in the world that doesn't have *something* it wants to keep off the books. But what the law doesn't know, what the employees don't know, what even half the board of directors may not know — the accountant, he knows.

One productive trip to the accounting department can pay off for enterprising young Kindred. Everything from insider information to extortion and blackmail material can be found here, neatly laid out in steady rows of numbers.

Or, if you'd prefer to keep it simple, you can always mess around with the figures. The man in charge of a company's accounting has his hands around its throat, and most companies are a lot easier to acquire once they've had to file for bankruptcy. If you're willing to settle for damaged goods, this can be a lot easier than trying to wrest shares of a healthy institution away from someone.

It may be a bit harder to suborn the accountants than it was the janitors, of course; the math club tends to be paid better and has a hell of a lot more to lose. Still, it's a rare thing to find an entire accounting department or firm in which *someone* hasn't had her hand in the till. And if all that fails, you no doubt know more direct methods of "persuasion."

Human Resources

Sometimes it's a lot easier to lay claim to a company after it's gone at least partially down the tubes. This can, of course, be done by driving it into bankruptcy, using the accounting department as mentioned earlier. The other way, both subtler and less financially damaging to the corporate entity itself, is through manipulation of the human resources department.

By devastating employee morale, it becomes a fairly simply matter to drive the employees away in droves. The human resources department in many companies has absolute power over the payroll, over project assignments, even over the hiring — and firing

—process. Mistakes and poor decisions in any or all of these areas can very quickly result in a miserable population of workers. As the employees flee, projects fail due to lack of skill and effort, and the company's reputation begins to suffer. Taken a step further still, if the problems continue, the company's performance overall will slide downward, damaging their market worth and stock values. It is entirely possible for a Kindred in the know — in other words, the one responsible for these problems to begin with — to stand prepared, ready to swoop in and snag the various stocks that are being dumped across the market. It may even be possible to claim a controlling share in this manner; at the very least, it provides a comfortable margin for your next attempt.

SCREW UNTO OTHERS

Safer than using these techniques to acquire your own interests is to use them on a rival's resources. If you swoop in and buy CrapTek on the cheap, well, you've earned yourself some interest in CrapTek. But wouldn't it be better if your nemesis has all his eggs in CrapTek's basket and the whole thing goes to....well, you see where I'm headed with this.

Believe me, they'd do it to you if they knew you were there.

Tellers and Data Entry

Corporations and other businesses live and die by their data. Accountants keep the books straight (or crooked, depending on the business and the particular accountant), but they're not responsible for *generating* the information. The people who do — those whose plodding, mind-numbing tasks are made up solely of reading information off a paper and punching keys on a computer — have a gun to the heads of their bosses and institutions of employment, if only they knew how to pull the trigger.

Think, for instance, what you might accomplish with the services of a single bank teller. With someone to provide access to the bank's account information, you can do as you please with the money involved. The ways in which you can use the power of the banks are discussed in some detail later on, but access to a bank's tellers can put you on the road toward gaining power over the entire institution. Money can disappear utterly, or change hands and locations without rhyme or reason. It should, in fact, be a fairly simply matter to make it appear that someone within the operation has been embezzling from his own bank.

You may not even have to manufacture evidence of wrongdoing. If the company has been funneling profits into a cover corporation or a Swiss bank, two departments will know about it — accounting and data entry.

Why would you want to cause this sort of damage? Most businesses and banks become a lot easier to acquire once they've started to fail. Executives get out while the getting is good, leaving gaps in the power structure that you should be only too happy to fill. They might even become desperate to save their precious institution, willing to perform very nearly any favor you ask, if you can only make the hurting stop. You may even succeed in loosening the grip of the Kindred already attached to your chosen institution, as the elders see their cash cow suddenly failing and seek a different investment.

You'll most likely have to extort or otherwise coerce cooperation from the tellers, though. You may find that some of them are not easily bribed, considering the hefty criminal penalties for the actions you'll be requiring them to take. In fact, you're almost guaranteed to lose at least a few pawns during the initial investigations that will occur automatically once the bank or corporation starts showing discrepancies in its numbers; but if you're prepared for this ahead of time, you should be able to continue the operation with little to no impact on your ability to function.

Secretarial Staff

When you get right down to it, these are the people who actually run the company. While the janitors can usually find out at least the basics of what's going on, the secretaries know before it happens. Hell, secretaries usually know more than the executives themselves, since they're the ones who record, organize and file it all away. When was the last time you heard a secretary asking an executive where to find the Bank of America file?

If you can gain any kind of leverage with the secretaries of a company, you've got it made. Need to know what the board's going to do before they do it? Need to know who the CFO is meeting with, and what it concerns? Or maybe it would interest you to know that Mr. Williams has his secretary tell his wife that he's got a conference every Wednesday night when no such meetings exist.

But the secretarial staff isn't simply a source of knowledge. It is they who pass along the messages, memos and information that guide the company in its everyday dealings. The right word, squawking fuzzily from the intercom, can set the executive beyond the oak door to making all sorts of interesting decisions and judgment calls.

As with the accountants, secretaries can be difficult to persuade without resorting to blatantly supernatural means. Still, many of them can indeed be tempted by the promise of the riches they see every day and the opportunity to rise higher than a job that still, for much of society, carries a derogatory connotation.

AN OBJECT LESSON

Suppose, then, that a hypothetical Kindred, who happens to be the primogen of Clan Ventrue in Houston, is a staunch supporter of that city's prince. Suppose, too, that she happens to have a great deal of her own personal power and fortune tied up in, say, the pharmaceutical and medical industry that thrives on Houston's world-famous Medical Center. Now, for the icing on the cake, let's point out that Houston,

CARROT AND STICK

It's always advisable to hold at least two measures of influence over your various pawns and puppets; one punitive, one rewarding. You might be blackmailing that executive assistant into passing along insider information by threatening to tell his wife about the affair he's having with the accounts manager, but sooner or later, you may just push too hard too quickly. No matter how desperate people are to keep their secrets, there comes a point at which they'd rather let it get out than remain a slave to someone else's whims.

If, on the other hand, this particular executive assistant is making an additional five K a month working for you, he's got something *else* to lose by breaking off your "partnership," and he probably won't feel quite so much hatred toward the Kindred holding his leash. Remember, even the blood bond can be weakened by prolonged periods of poor treatment, and most of your mortal "contacts" aren't going to have nearly so intense an attachment to you as a trusted ghoul would. Be ready to force cooperation any time it becomes necessary, but always be sure to reward such cooperation when it comes easily. If you don't have the cash resources to make huge payoffs then you'll have to find some other way of rewarding useful pawns, but it's important that you do it. Hell, get that executive assistant out of his three-series Beemer and into a five-series — just hide that expense somewhere else in the account registry. It makes things far easier (and far safer) in the long view, and the long view is all the undead should ever really be concerned with.

located as it is in the southern portion of the state of Texas, is one of the largest Camarilla cities near the Sabbat-infested Mexican border.

You and your hypothetical ambitious coterie have just learned, through various insider contacts, that a Chicago-based pharmaceutical concern is about to make a hostile takeover bid against that primogen's holdings. You know that she's got the finances and contacts to fight them off — but you're pretty sure that, in the fiscal chaos, you can acquire a controlling stock in one of the smaller companies that falls under her larger umbrella, sweeping it out from under her very nose. This particular company, though small, brings in a hell of a lot more capital than you've ever seen; furthermore, it gives you easy access to a particular restricted substance that just happens to satisfy the addictive cravings of the current boy-toy of another hypothetical Kindred, the Toreador primogen. Suddenly, you're a player in the game on a brand new level.

Congratulations. You've just scored a major victory in your own little corner of the Jyhad. Are you a genius? Or a dumbass in over his head? Let us proceed.

Between your own efforts and the attempted hostile takeover, that Ventrue primogen finds herself with a much smaller pool of resources to draw upon than she used to. The fact that she "allowed" one of her holdings, even a small one, to be stolen by a group of upstarts (read: you) has cost her dearly on the Kindred political front. That support she used to be able to count on from the Toreador primogen? Gone, not only because the Ventrue's lost some status, but also because she's no longer so easily able to provide chemical favors for the Toreador primogen's pet.

With the sudden weakening of his staunchest supporter, the prince finds it more difficult to maintain his eminence among the primogen. To complicate matters, a third hypothetical Kindred, the Malkavian primogen, has got his own unintelligible projects going. The Nosferatu are refusing to come out of their sewers, and the Toreador primogen, smelling weakness, suddenly makes a play for yet more of the Ventrue's crumbling territory.

If the Sabbat chooses this particular time to make a move on Houston, maybe even a crusade — well, there's a serious problem, isn't there? And at least a large chunk of the city's current instability is *your* fault.

So where does legitimate personal gain end and treason to the prince and Camarilla begin? If the prince — or anyone in a position of power — is weakened or even overthrown by your efforts, how much of that is acceptable in the dog-eat-dog world of the Kindred?

Take it a step further. While most clans aren't the monolithic entities that naïve or treacherous Kindred sometimes portray them as, some inspire (demand?) more allegiance than others. Among the Ventrue, for instance, it's considered bad form to blatantly yank power and property away from one of your fellows. But among the Tremere, as we all know, you can backstab each other to your dead heart's content — as long as you don't bust up the pyramid, whatever purpose that serves.

No simple answer exists, of course; there's no such thing where the Kindred are concerned. What one Kindred calls "treason," another calls a perfectly legitimate business acquisition. Whichever approach you take, be aware of the consequences that any drastic shift in the balance of power may cause. Despite any gains you may have achieved through your efforts, you're not by any means guaranteed to like — or even survive — the final results.

Hypothetically. *Ab ovo usque ad mala.*

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Now that you've got some idea how to go about taking what you want, it's time to decide exactly what it is that you *do* want. "Business" encompasses an enormous variety of entities, and each comes with its own set of advantages and privileges. Even with eternity ahead of you, you can't have it all — and you certainly can't *start* with it all. The list below is by no means comprehensive, but it ought to provide you with a few reasonable places to build your empire.

MONEY LAUNDERING

Just about every type of business, from the largest corporation or bank to the smallest struggling firm, is good for purposes of fronting and money laundering. Funds funneled into a business — preferably from numerous, untraceable sources and in cash form — can then be invested or banked on behalf of the business itself, or else transferred to a third corporate or financial entity that can in turn transfer the funds to a fourth, and so on. Move the money around enough, and it becomes practically impossible to discover its original source. If done properly (in other words, clandestinely), this is a good way to turn illicit gains into legal capital, and it's one benefit you can pick up in almost any niche of the business arena. This is especially useful if you're already got a substantial amount of interest and influence in criminal activities and organizations, and are looking to branch out.

CORPORATIONS

Tobacco. Pharmaceuticals. Automobiles and electronics. Soft drinks. All these, and a thousand more besides, are the sprawling corporate entities that lurk like bloated spiders in the web of international commerce. Other forms of big business exist — some of them may even be more useful in many respects — but it is those entities that fall under the umbrella definition of "corporation" that are the ambrosia of the ambitious Kindred.

"Corporation" is, in many ways, a vast category. Unlike others covered here (i.e. banks, law firms, etc.), there is no set sphere of influence. The very term "corporation" is, perhaps, not entirely accurate for what we're looking at; nearly any business in any field can incorporate, if they so choose. Many other businesses presented in this chapter could easily fall under this particular heading as well. For the sake of discussion, however, we're talking "corporations" in the paranoid, big-money-makes-the-world-turn sense of the word. Each of these is an entity designed to rake in huge amounts of capital while providing goods or services, and each is run by a large group of people (board members and shareholders) who actually have little or nothing to do with the work at hand. Steel and computers and Coca-Cola are all lumped together because, at their heart, these are all the same species of creature. They tend to operate in the same manner, and they all provide — roughly — the same sorts of benefits to the Kindred involved with them.

Against the backdrop of the modern nights, every nasty theory, every Hollywood stereotype, is true to some degree. Corporations tend to be faceless entities that seem to have an unending supply of resources, all of which they will happily use to stomp flat anyone who dares to rock the boat. The vast majority of them are owned and run by old money, an elitist boys' club that enjoys fine cigars, elegant cars (driven by someone else), the best champagnes and grinding the little people beneath their \$2000 Italian leather heels. If you're mortal, it's nearly impossible to move beyond a certain step on the corporate ladder, because you've got to wait for someone to die, and then hope that you, for some incomprehensible reason, are the one chosen to take the place of the fallen.

If you're Kindred, it's not much easier. You quite simply can't work the day shifts and you can't just wait for someone to die. Eternal unlife makes wonderful opportunities for long-term yield.

WE WERE HERE FIRST!

If you're going to set about trying to take corporate and financial power away from someone, you might do

well to learn who it is you're about to make very, very unhappy. While all the clans of Kindred can probably claim some interest in the corporate sector, a select few have a great deal more of it than others, and it is these wicked fellows from whom you're going to have to steal what you want.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that the Ventrue have — or at least are believed to have — the largest dominion in this particular arena. While they've got their fingers in everything, they tend to focus a bit more on the actual corporations, often backing the "old money" fortunes that keep the wheels turning. The Toreador also play the business game more so than their other companions in the Camarilla, for their comfortable unlives don't come cheaply. Close behind them are the Giovanni, though the Necromancers seem a bit more interested in the fiscal entities — banking and other financial institutions, for example — than they are other forms of business.

On the Sabbat side of things, the Lasombra cast their long shadows over the field as well; the Keepers, however, often find themselves with the leftovers; not because of any lack of skill or ambition, but simply because so many of the larger national and international business entities are based firmly in Camarilla-dominated or Kindred-hostile territory. Still, they find their influence slowly beginning to grow as they move to rectify the situation, and the power they already wield should never be underestimated.

As a side note, the Camarilla has recently discovered that the Assamites are also heavy into big business, though their sphere of influence is only now spreading to the Western world to any great degree. With the clan apparently split, however, and with the current diaspora outward, business-minded Ventrue, Giovanni and Lasombra are suddenly finding themselves very nervous. I'd like to say "I told you so," but the Assassins have been so cagey that I don't think anyone saw it coming. Good for them — sort of.

WHAT'S IT ALL GOOD FOR?

Check this out. Apocryphal? Perhaps. It came over my fax a year ago, or maybe 18 months. Who wrote it? I don't know — the source was phreaked. Save your damn questions for later.

"Ms. Burae? Your 11 o'clock is here to see you."

"Thank you, Jenny. Send him in. Then you can go home for the night."

Medea Burae reached out and flicked off the intercom, cutting her secretary off in the middle of her "Thank you." She ran a hand over the crisp pleats of her suit — navy blue, of course — and through her mass of dark hair. It wasn't

that she was particularly concerned with her appearance; she knew full well that she was as well coifed and pressed tonight as always. It was a simple habit she'd picked up as a mortal and hadn't quite — even so long after her Embrace — managed to drop.

Her eyes narrowed as the door to her office drifted open and sent a beam of florescent light stabbing into the room like a lance; it was blotted out an instant later by the shape of the man she'd arranged to meet. She could smell the sweat on him, knew he was nervous because he showed no trace of it in his expression. The man was a professional at hiding his true feelings — but not from someone like her.

"Take a seat, Senator."

The chair made a muffled sound, almost a gurgling noise, as it was dragged across the carpet. "Thank you, Ms. Burae. I..."

"My apologies if I sound abrupt, Senator, but time is pressing. You assured me that you could arrange FDA approval of the new drug with some alacrity. We're still waiting."

The senator smiled wanly. "There were — problems, Ms. Burae. I'm afraid that it's an abortion pill, and there's no issue that's a bigger kiss of death..."

"I need RU-486 approved, Senator. Certain — contemporaries of mine, if you will — have requested my financial aid on a project. I need the resources the new medication will bring me. And you, Senator, need my contributions if you want this next reelection campaign to be anywhere near as successful as your first one. Yes?"

"They would certainly be helpful, Ms. Burae."

"And you wouldn't want me to throw my support behind someone else, would you? Someone more likely to be able to help me out of situations like this?"

"No, madam. I can't say that I would."

"Then I think we understand each other perfectly. Don't we Senator?"

Given that it's one of the hardest domains for an eager young Kindred to break into, why would you want to have anything to do with the corporate sector at all? What possible advantages could there be that you couldn't more quickly attain by going through other, more easily approachable, forms of business?

Glad you asked.

Wealth

Let it never be said that money — and lots of it — is a useless commodity for the Kindred. While most Ventrue or Lasombra (loath as they are to agree on anything) would probably tell you that money is just a means to an end, the fact remains that it's a very powerful means. Money alone won't buy you the sort of power or position you crave, but it will definitely grease enough wheels to keep you moving ever nearer your eventual goals. Very few institutions in the world can generate the sorts of mass currency that a

successful corporation can — assuming you can pry that money away from those who already have it.

The problem with wealth — at least according to everyone who doesn't yet have it — is that it takes money to make money. The reason that corporations are so damned effective at raking in the green is because they have so much capital to draw on already. This is why Kindred cling such influence, perhaps even more than those involved in other institutions — everything you need to set yourself up for unlife can be found here.

HIDDEN ASSETS

Sometimes, the wisest (and richest) of the Kindred choose to invest in companies and corporations in which they have no interest beyond the fiscal. After all, they need somewhere to put their wealth, and ways to build it, as much as any mortal. Not *every* financial play is the first step in some greater scheme to accrue more power; sometimes a Kindred's investments really are just investments.

These Kindred often go about trying to select the most unlikely businesses they can imagine. How likely does it sound that a Cainite would invest in Martha Stewart's company? Or in the upcoming action blockbuster starring Arnold or Bruce or Keanu? Kindred investors are quite active in Hollywood and Silicon Valley, in publishing, in silverware and greetings cards; if it's a business that you can't possibly imagine the Kindred sinking their fangs into, they're there, as investors if nothing else. Ever since its IPO, the World Wrestling Federation has had an astonishing number of Kindred choose to invest. Using the term "vampire" won't even raise an eyebrow if you're talking about Microsoft.

This has to do with a lot more than finding new and interesting places for their money, of course. Most Kindred who choose such... unique... investment strategies are thinking defensively. Their enemies are going to find it a lot harder to go after their assets if they don't have the first clue what those assets *are*. Perhaps even more importantly, it's never a good idea for the Kindred to act like stereotypical — well, vampires. They don't wander around downtown wearing black capes, they don't bite the necks of everyone they meet (well, not publicly), they don't proclaim "I want to suck your blood!" and they don't limit their investments to interests that allow them to "control and manipulate." It protects the Masquerade, it protects them from hunters, and it protects them from each other.



Consider, too, the advantages that the Damned have when playing the stock market. Your average mortal is hoping for the fast money, even if she knows enough not to expect any such thing. Sure, some of them are clever enough to be patient, to go for long-term investments. Slow and steady wins the race, and all that. But the kine are constantly tormented by the knowledge that their time is limited; take too long to accrue your various millions, and you won't be around long enough to enjoy them. The Kindred, on the other hand, have nothing but time. It's going to take 150 years for your current stocks to pay off in anything resembling the fortunes you're hoping for? So what? You'll be here in 2149 (assuming the doomsayers are wrong and Gehenna isn't just around the bend), ready and able to enjoy your long-awaited riches. Hell, buy a post office box and take the long sleep until then, if you can't wait. It takes more than a little effort for young Kindred to shake the human must-have-everything-now mindset, but once they manage, they almost invariably find that patience is, indeed, a virtue — maybe one of the few the Kindred have.

Political Influence

If there's a political arena that's as hotly contested as the corporate infrastructure, it would have to be the government (see the next chapter). It's all well and good for those Kindred who already have favors owed them among the various legal bodies, but what happens when you need something done in the halls of power and you haven't yet managed to put one of your own agents through the doors?

One word: lobbyists. These are, in many ways, the lifeblood of modern corporations. The amount of legal bribery that occurs on Capital Hill is staggering, but this is how big businesses stay in business. Need a favor from a particular congressman? Need this bill passed, or that bill vetoed? Or perhaps, as with Medea Burae, you need the wheels of the bureaucracy to move just a little bit faster than you can accomplish by yourself. (Was she really behind the legalization of the abortion pill? I doubt it, but no single person is ever responsible. I'm sure her contacts added their voices to the general din, though....) It's a simple equation. Politicians who need money and will do damn near anything to get it, plus corporations who have the money and need favors from the politicians. By working your way into the corporate structure, you can kill two birds with one stone. It's nearly as good as having direct influence over the governmental figures themselves.

Favors and Leverage

Regardless of what the specific industry is in which you've involved yourself, chances are others are in there with you, Kindred and kine alike, who are going

to need something only someone in your field can provide. Whether it's computer software or military hardware, telecommunication or transportation, you are now in a position to grant your petitioners favors. If you happen to pull the strings at one of the larger airlines in your city, for instance, the local Kindred are going to be coming to you when circumstances demand they fly. Yeah, they'll resent owing you something. Better that, though, than take an average commercial flight and risk God knows how many things going wrong on the way.

The flip side to this is that you can, if you're willing to risk the danger to your good reputation, use those favors to put your rivals in less than desirable circumstances. Using the previous example of arranged air travel, you always have the option of arranging accidents to make sure a particular plane suffers difficulties and is forced to redirect. You wouldn't want to make things dangerous for your Kindred passenger — no need to risk the Masquerade by keeping the plane in the air past sunrise — but you could easily arrange for the gentleman to miss that important meeting with the Giovanni in Boston. Be careful doing this, though. If it happens too often, the other Kindred are going to realize that you're abusing your position. They'll stop coming to you, even if you are the only game in town. Betrayal is a part of Kindred nature, but employ it judiciously.

But why limit your relationship with other Kindred to granting favors and boons on a one-to-one basis when you can often squeeze juicier concessions out of them? Suppose for a moment that, rather than the above-mentioned airline, your enterprise of choice is the local steel industry. Seems unlikely that there's anything you can provide that another Kindred would desperately need, right?

Wrong. What about the automotive industry in your region? What about construction companies? What — if you happen to be in the proper geographic location — about local shipbuilders? All of these are massive, hugely profitable interests. All of them are almost certainly the domains of other area Kindred. And all of them are utterly dependent on your steel for their commercial survival. Who needs favors when you've got extortion? A threat to cut off their supply of raw materials — a threat that you assuredly have the power to back up — practically guarantees cooperation on their part. That is, at least, until they throw up their hands in frustration and seek out the services of the nearest hit man, but you knew there were risks involved when you became a steel baron.

All of this works both ways, of course; you'll have to ask favors from those institutions outside your particular sphere of influence, and you run the same risks of



being muscled around in dealing with them that they do in dealing with you. But hey, at least having the weight of your own local industry gives you a fairly hefty bargaining chip.

Status

Never, never, *never* underestimate the power of status. Most elder Kindred, at least, if not some of their foolish progeny, recognize the inherent difficulty in doing what appears to come naturally to them. This whole “manipulating people and controlling stuff” gig is *hard*, and the fact that so much of the corporate structure is owned by those same elders makes getting involved in it harder still. The elders won’t necessarily like you if you manage to snatch away some of their turf — odds are, in fact, that more than one of them will consider you a threat and do their damndest to destroy you utterly — but they *will* be forced to respect you, at least a little.

Herd

Admittedly, you don’t want to take advantage of this too often. Corporations may employ thousands of individuals, most of whom are nameless and faceless numbers as far as management is concerned. Nevertheless, if one of them starts screaming “vampire,” or if they start dropping dead in unusual numbers, HR is going to notice.

Still, for the occasional emergency, it’s certainly good to know that you have unrestricted access to a place where you can find large numbers of delectable kine just waiting to assuage your thirst. Even after dark, the average corporate headquarters is brimming with life, from the janitors and security to the industrious (that is, type-A obsessive) personalities who are there working late in order to wrap up this or that project. It is, in light of all the other benefits, a minor bonus at best — but it is also, perhaps, the one that speaks most closely to the true nature of the Kindred. I’ve heard the saying, “Stay in the red” before. That’s good advice.

BANKING AND CREDIT

The corporations and other such entrepreneurial concerns may very well generate the vast majority of the money currently circulating throughout the economy, but they don’t have any direct authority over those currencies. Consider, for a moment, that for all the trillions of dollars such entities earn in any given year, only a tiny portion of that is “real” money. Most of it, in the form of stocks or other securities, doesn’t exist in any liquid form, tangible or electronic. Your 100,000 shares of WhateverCorp may technically be worth millions of dollars, but you can’t exactly spend those shares, can you?

WHAT ABOUT THE SABBAT?

What, then, does the Black Hand get out of this sort of thing? The sect as a whole certainly acknowledges precious little in the way of status involved. Even with more and more of the Sabbat being forced to admit that the mortal world has its uses, the sect still has only minor respect for those who have found a way to take advantage of that fact.

Is it the wealth? Camites of the Sabbat like money as much as the next blood-sucking nocturnal marauder, so that's always a plus. Still, it seems that profit alone isn't enough of an incentive for members of a sect that often consider themselves a superior race bent on a holy crusade.

Government influence? Well, maybe a little. Those Sabbat who have managed to place themselves in such a position are certainly more than willing to use what authority they have. The problem there, though, is that the Camarilla has a lot more people in equal, or even more influential, positions.

But then, that's really the answer. The foremost goal of the Sabbat, as far as its interest in the corporate sector, is countering the Camarilla. The Black Hand's interest in affairs of business — or at least a large proportion of that interest — is self-defense. It has seen, now, just how much the Camarilla can accomplish using the kine as its weapons, and the Sabbat leadership (such as it is) is determined not to let that advantage go unchecked.

If you're dealing with real currency, liquid assets, you're talking banks and credit.

As with other sorts of businesses, things in the banking and finance sectors seem to have gotten a little better for the common man over the past century or so. Most banks, pretending concern with public image, have cleaned up their act; rarely, now, will you find a Mr. Potter lurking behind the counter, ready to foreclose at the drop of a hat and put your family out on the street. The credit unions aren't lying in wait for you to miss a single payment before they jack your interest rates through the roof. Not even these treasured financial institutions are deaf to the modern call for customer service.

And as with the corporations, it's all a front. Think the banks aren't still greedy, top-heavy institutions that could give the corporations a run for their money? Think again. Sure, they may look more friendly on the surface; it's a lure. Those constant mistakes that seem to crop up on bank statements

from time to time, the sort that cost \$20 here, \$50 there — they're not mistakes. When was the last time you saw one in favor of the consumer? They're no longer foreclosing on that first missed mortgage payment because they'd rather hit you up for the interest later when you have the money — money that you probably had to get by taking out a second mortgage with someone else.

Remember what the banks are doing with your money while they've supposedly got it stashed safely away — they're playing the stock market. Doesn't matter if they lose millions; it's not their money at risk, after all. They, like everyone else, are looking for that quick gain. The banks, in fact, are even more anxious for instant profits than most, since they know that they've got your money only until the moment you decide (how dare you!) to take it back. In some ways, banks are no different than any other large business — someone (or a small group of someones) sits at the top, getting rich off the labor of the guy who puts a few bucks in the bank after cashing his check at the liquor store.

If the Kindred feel a kinship with the corporate entities because they, too, are the living dead, then their affection for the banks must come from the fact that they're both parasites.

THE LOVE OF MONEY

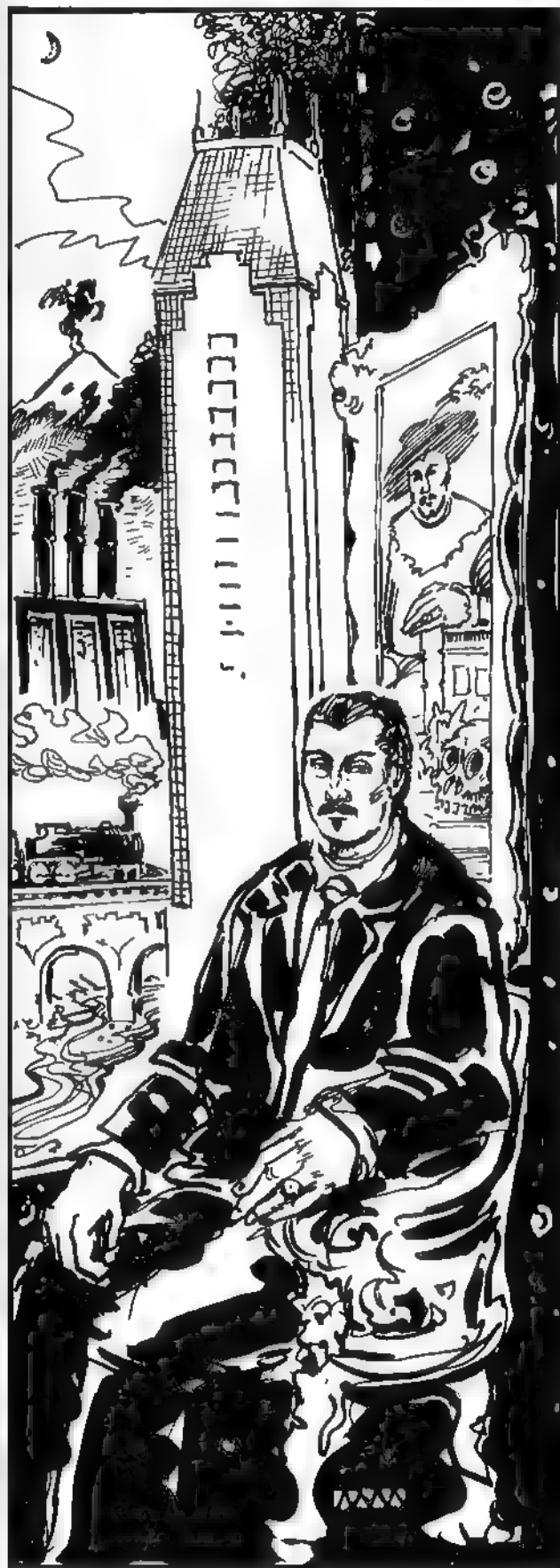
Time for another story. This one's one of my favorites, but only because I'm involved. The names have been changed to protect the guilty. Try to guess which one's me. No, not Johanssen, but thanks for the clumsy attempt at flattery.

Mr. Johanssen leaned back ever so slightly in his chair, fingers steepled together before him as though he were about to pray. "Are you quite certain I can't convince you to change your mind, my boy?" he asked softly, eyes focused on a spot just over Alexander's right shoulder.

"I said no, didn't I?" The Brujah was trying desperately to hold onto his temper — satisfying as it might be to tear the Blue Blood a second useless asshole, he knew full well the trouble it could get him into — but what self-control he'd managed to dredge up was fraying around the edges. "How many times I gotta fucking say it before you figure it out?"

"Oh, I've quite well figured it out, Mr. Grant." Without taking his eyes off that same, empty space, the Ventrue reached into his coat pocket and removed a cellular phone no larger than Alexander's palm. With a casual flip and the stab of a single button, Johanssen raised it to his cheek. "I'm afraid Mr. Grant has chosen not to cooperate, Samuel. Yes, go ahead; just as we discussed. Thank you."

Alexander glared suspiciously as the phone disconnected with a click that was audible even across the plush office. "What was that about?" he growled.



LAUGHING ALL THE WAY TO THE BANK

Again, we see Kindred stratification and specialization evident in the financial sector. Although most clans can honestly claim an interest in banking and finance, a select few clans have proven themselves the masters of the game.

The Ventrue (and, to a lesser degree, the Toreador) would like to believe — and more importantly, would like everyone else to believe — that they've achieved the same level of mastery here that they have over the corporate interests. And it is true that the Ventrue attained a greater degree of fiscal mastery than most of the other clans. But when it comes to banking and international currencies markets, even the Blue Bloods find themselves occasionally outmaneuvered by the Italian Necromancers, at least in certain colloquial situations. The Giovanni, though best known (or perhaps stereotyped) for their connections with the realm of the dead, are bankers nonpareil in the world arena. They've learned to play games with numbers that should be downright impossible by all known laws of mathematics and finance. Rumor has it that the Ventrue have begun consulting the Tremere on the matter, concerned that there might be a supernatural element in play. The typical Tremere response to such a rumor is to scoff, claiming that if there were any such widespread mystical manipulation of society they would know about it, and that the Ventrue simply don't want to believe they've been bested at something.

For the first time in minutes, Johanssen let his gaze squarely meet that of his unhappy guest. "What, that? Nothing, really. I merely arranged for Samuel to place a call to one of my colleagues at Visa."

"Visa? You worried about a credit card?"

"Me? Not at all. I'm afraid that I've just utterly destroyed your family's credit rating, though."

Alexander froze; it took everything he had, including the knowledge that the bastard had a great deal of security waiting just outside the room, to hold onto his temper. He could feel the Beast begging to be set free.

"You did... what?"

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry. You're still quite attached to your mortal family, aren't you? Such a shame, really. As I understand it, they were just about to buy that house. Must have the extra space, with the new baby on the way."

"You son of a bitch!"

"I am, at that. I can make it go away, of course, just as easily as I made it happen. Now, Mr. Grant, would you care to reconsider your position?"

Considering that banks don't have outstanding stock the way most corporate entities do, many younger Kindred hungry for their first taste of power assume that securing influence in a larger company is easier than going the route of the banks. While it's true that the average mortal would find it nigh impossible to assume any role of true authority in the banking structure (unless he actually managed to work his way through the ranks to CEO or the like), the fact is that fewer Kindred are involved in banking than have their fingers in other corporate sectors. Furthermore, perhaps because influence in banking is less about gaining money and more about directing it, those who are here aren't quite as jealous about guarding their territory. That's not to suggest that they welcome outsiders moving in on their turf, merely that the competition is a *little* less cutthroat. So what, then, can you do with sway among the banks and credit unions?

Wealth

Banks and related fiscal interests are like other businesses; they're designed to make money. Interest payments, service fees, foreclosures and resales, and of course the various stock market games they play with the money deposited by the unwashed masses — all these and more are intended to bring the banks more green than they're required to pay out. With the larger institutions, these can prove to be truly prodigious sums of cash.

But before you go racing off to blood bond your local branch manager, bear a few caveats in mind. Banking doesn't happen at the street level; those who hold the true power are the ones who haven't seen a drive-through teller or an ATM machine in years (if ever). As with the massive businesses discussed earlier, banking's financial power begins, and ends, at the top. The people who make money off the banks are never the ones who work in the actual branch offices. If you want to be a part of that, you need to find yourself a corporate headquarters, not some tiny branch inside your nearest supermarket or next to the gas station on the corner.

The other downside is that, while you can skim a bank, it's not going to generate the sheer magnitude of income that a corporation would. With fewer people at the top, no stockholders requiring them to pay out dividends, and fewer mass-moneymaking projects, banks aren't expected to create the same tidal waves of cash that other large businesses do. That, and, unless you own the bank, someone's going to be watching that money like a hawk.

Emergency Funds

While banks don't generate the profits many corporations do, they're still sitting on the largest

stores of liquid assets in the world. A Kindred with connections in a large bank or credit union can come up with almost any amount of money on relatively short notice.

This is not, however, your money. You can use it if you need to, but it all has to be accounted for. If you aren't able to put at least most of it back, you're going to have problems. As much as the elders want you to believe otherwise, Kindred simply can't subvert certain elements of kine society. If a national bank comes up \$500,000,000 short, or American Express discovers an eight-figure debit on the books, a mass investigation's in the making, and serious repercussions for all concerned shall abound. You might be able to get away with it once — for a discreet amount — but you'll likely wind up destroying the institution you've spent so long trying to master, and you'll definitely lose at least some of your highly placed contacts. It's good to know you've got the option for emergencies, but this isn't one you want to abuse.

Fiscal Power

This is the big one, the meat and potatoes of the banking and credit industries, and the best reason in the world for the Kindred to be interested in this particular field. Banks and credit agencies have the financial futures of nearly every citizen of the industrialized nations in the palms of their hands. This may or may not include your rival Kindred — but it almost certainly includes some of their ghouls, or allies, or acquaintances, or agents, or rivals.... Think about it.

Is the Toreador who owns that nightclub an enemy of yours? She'll see the error of her ways the next time she needs a loan to keep her establishment afloat while she remodels to follow the ever-changing tide of mortal trends. Or, as with Mr. Johanssen, perhaps you've got a fellow Kindred who's reluctant to do you a favor. He may just have to rethink that decision with financial ruin hanging over his family's heads like the Sword of Damocles. People, groups, businesses — all these can be raised up by a gleaming smile from the banks, and all can be thrown down from on high by the smallest frown. The American dollar bill proclaims "In God We Trust." Become that god, and see exactly what you can do.

LAW FIRMS

They lurk in the shadows of modern society, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting prey. They pull strings, direct corporate and political interests from behind the scenes, always letting their catspaws take the fall when things go south. They accumulate unheard-of wealth and power, all at the expense of the little people, the masses about whom they couldn't care less. They feed on the toil, the misery and the blood of humanity.

CLAN WARS

Okay, if individual Kindred can use their own influence in banking to damage or even destroy their rivals, why isn't the same thing done on a clanwide scale? Why haven't the Ventrue, for instance, crippled the Giovanni in any and every city in which they've competed? Why haven't the Tremere used their own banking influence (and that of the Ventrue, for that matter) to keep the spreading Assamites out of the various industries across America and Western Europe?

Most Kindred don't particularly advertise their presence, of course. Unless one's sources of information are pretty damn good, there's no real way to know for sure that the foreign investor who just bought heavily into your town's automotive plant is actually a schismatic Assamite. To make a clanwide sweep, even on a local scale, requires pinpoint-accurate information, and that's just not easily available.

Perhaps more important is the fact that *more* power doesn't necessarily mean *enough* power. While it may be true that the Ventrue are better globally than the Giovanni at playing the banking game, the Giovanni are no slouches at it themselves, particularly in certain local contexts. The Ventrue have certainly been able to drive them out of the industry in select cities, but they've typically taken one hell of a beating in doing it. In many of these cases, they've found their own interests in the Giovanni's area of expertise similarly threatened in retaliation.

No, this sort of fiscal dancing is all well and good on a private, individual level. The moment you start blatantly using your newfound power against entire clans, you're going to have a war on your hands. It's probably not one you can win — even if only rival Kindred align against you.

They also spend a lot of time working with Kindred. Some resemblance, isn't there?

Much like the fatty excesses in a pot roast, the lawyers of the world almost invariably rise to the top. Some work alone, or nearly so, others in firms so large they practically qualify as small corporations in their own right, but the best ones all exert an influence far beyond their apparent positions and means.

The thing about law firms that make the Kindred salivate like Pavlov's dogs is the scent of so much power in such small packages. While some are truly monolithic, the average firm isn't really all that huge, certainly

not in comparison to the sort of power it wields. One loyal agent in the upper levels of the firm can accomplish feats the likes of which it would take an entire department to arrange in a corporate setting.

And getting that single loyal agent isn't all that difficult. *Everybody* in a law firm has something to hide, and if you can dig that something up, you own them.

Am I saying that every lawyer in the world is corrupt? Well, no, not all of them. Always beware of those who want to make a difference instead of making their fortune — every occupation has its zealots. But moral bankruptcy is common among lawyers, and the zealots don't tend to become senior partners. Corruption not only implies the presence of information the

THEY HAVE THE LAW ON THEIR SIDE

While it's safe to assume that certain clans have more interest and more agents in the legal field than others, it is absolutely impossible to say with any certainty that Clan X has the most influence over lawyers in general. The sheer number and variety of law firms, combined with obvious utility of having such an organization working on one's behalf, have led to an astonishing interest in this particular area, even from some of the clans who don't normally profess interest in such things. Before the Camarilla reclaimed New York, it's believed that the Tzimisce, of all clans, could claim direct influence in at least half-a-dozen firms in Manhattan alone and had at least one partner among them within its own ranks (presumably as a ghoul).

As a side note, there's been growing awareness among the Camarilla clans that a group of Malkavians has been calling in favors, pulling strings and otherwise bending over backward to ensure that their pet lawyers manage to get violent criminals declared insane as frequently as possible, thus assuring that they're sent to mental institutions rather than maximum security prisons. This has proven difficult, given the current public impatience with the insanity plea in general. Nevertheless, several dangerous individuals have indeed disappeared through the doors of various hospitals, never to be heard from again. When pressed on this question, several highly positioned Camarilla Kindred have uttered vague assurances that they "know" the Malkavians aren't Embracing these maniacs. The Malkavians themselves, or at least those who choose to entertain any discussion on the issue, never do more than shake their heads and smile.

lawyers want kept quiet, but it also suggests a relatively high level of greed. Put those two factors together, and you've got a situation tailored for the Kindred to step in and exert real influence.

POWER OF ATTORNEY

Lawyers and law firms are the tires on which other businesses ride. They aren't exactly a part of the machine *per se*, but you couldn't get very far without them. Every large business has either a legal department or a relationship with a particular firm — often both at once. Holding a law firm under your belt gives you access to courtrooms, boardrooms, government offices and police substations.

Even better, it's possible for a vampire to stake a claim on a law firm without having to compete with another Lick. Oh, you'll have to fight tooth and nail if you're trying to steal away one of the larger, more powerful firms, but if you're willing to settle for a young agency and allow it the time to grow...

Legal Representation

This may qualify as a no-brainer, but it's worth pointing out nonetheless: Lawyers are really handy to have around when you need a lawyer. Kindred usually find it in their own best interests to avoid legal trouble — those daytime court appearances can be the Final Death of you.

While you'll probably be able to avoid trouble with the law, what about your pawns? Ghouls, retainers, allies and lackeys all have an inexplicable tendency (usually at your selfish behest) to find themselves in all sorts of trouble, and running afoul of the law certainly qualifies. Assuming you don't already have the clout with the city or county authorities to have your people sprung, the next best thing to have is a lawyer who knows what she's doing and is either completely under your thumb or owes you a massive favor. Hell, or you could just hire her. Lawyers don't come cheap, though — at least, not the ones you want.

The secondary benefit of this particular arrangement is that you can sometimes position your own lawyers to make things uncomfortable for your enemies. Losing a case takes no skill, but it takes an expert to do it deliberately and still look like she was trying her damndest to win. Evidence can be misplaced or simply not entered into the record; information can be buried, witnesses discredited. You won't get an opportunity of this sort often — make sure you're prepared to take full advantage of it.

Easy Access

At times, even the police and FBI envy the lawyer's ability to go where he wants, when he wants. It's like having a badge to flash wherever you go, with no

jurisdictional boundaries. Rare indeed is the security guard, receptionist, secretary and even executive who won't open the door at the first mention of "I'm a lawyer." They wouldn't admit it, of course, but they're scared. In tonight's world of instant lawsuits, no one's willing to take the chance that you might just have valid reason to be upset with them.

What this *won't* do is earn you access to restricted areas; even the most timid night watchman is probably going to figure out that an attorney's got no business in a warehouse at 3:00 a.m. But if you're trying to make an after-hours appointment with the CEO of your rival's pet company, or need a few minutes to talk with a city councilman, having a lawyer to make the arrangements cuts through a whole lot of red tape.

Business and Political Contacts

Perhaps the most useful thing about law firms is that they're easier to get a handle on than corporations or political offices — but they have a substantial amount of pull with those same corporations and political offices. It's a rare circumstance when the lawyers tell the CEOs and the politicians what to do; it's a far more frequent occurrence that the lawyers tell these people what *not* to do. Corporations and political hopefuls are fearfully vulnerable to the threat of lawsuits. The negative publicity alone can often damage such entities beyond repair, and that's not even taking into account the legal costs of mounting a courtroom defense, nor the obscene damages that can accrue if the defendant should happen to actually *lose*.

By example, take a second look at one of the situations described earlier. We've discussed the possibilities inherent in your power within the steel industry, as regards the hammer you now hold over the heads of your nearest rivals in the automotive trade. Now reverse those positions — *you're* the car guy, and it's that damn Brujah (who's got juice in the steelworkers' union) trying to shove you around.

Time to break out the lawyers. The odds are good, no matter how much leverage that Brujah punk has, that the mortal management of the steel mill is going to back down when you inform them you'll be seeing them in court. They're not actually gaining anything by holding back (they don't have your rival's vested interest in seeing you fail on a personal level). Hell, they're *losing* money, because you're not paying for materials they aren't delivering. They're going to be pretty anxious to avoid the fallout of a prolonged court battle when there's no apparent reason to fight one at all.

If you can gain any sort of hold on their *own* lawyers, that's even better; most executives would rather shoot themselves in the groin than go against the advice of

their own legal department and risk getting sued for all — and more than — they're worth.

And as far as the impact lawyers have in terms of politics, just take a look at the American presidential race in 2000....

Discrediting Individuals

Take a step down on the scale from huge businesses and politicians to the individual. You don't have to lose a lawsuit to be discredited in the eyes of your peers and the public. All you have to do is be named as the defendant enough times — or, in severe cases, in just a single suit. People, who would almost always prefer to think the worst of their fellow man, will probably assume there's *some* truth to the allegations. A run of malpractice suits can destroy even the most well respected doctor. Litigation on the grounds of excessive force and brutality can ruin that cop who refused to do you a favor. Allegations of sexual abuse of a child diminish almost anyone in the public eye. Focus these attacks on the agents and pawns of rival Kindred, and you can wound if not cripple their operations.

Be careful. If the same law firm is constantly bringing the suits to court, even the dullest judge (or Kindred) is going to notice. This particular technique works a whole lot better if you've got your fingers in several different firms. In fact, if you can do that, there's no reason even to wait for the first trial to be over before launching your second salvo. Having the same charge coming from two unrelated sources does wonders toward establishing guilt in the court of public opinion. If you're able to do that, you've won the real battle before the jury's even been seated.

HIGH-TECH FIRMS, TECHNOLOGICAL START-UPS AND DOT-COMS

This may be the single arena of the corporate sector where the neonates have the edge over their venerable elders. If the Kindred at the top of the pile can't understand computers, electronics or the Internet well enough even to turn them on, they sure as heck aren't going to be able to compete in a field that's based entirely on understanding, using and selling such technologies. The notion of e-business is no more natural to these ancient creatures than is the drinking of blood to a mortal. They sit back, allowing their ponderous corporations to operate in the ways to which they've grown accustomed, and don't understand why the past year has seen them lose 37 percent of their market share in the software and electronics fields.

Incidentally, while computer hardware and software make up a substantial percentage of this particular market, don't make the mistake of assuming that's all there is. Many of the new start-ups are based in other markets, such as telecommunications or electronics. Imagine the uses inherent, for instance, in a new company that offers satellite-tracked, temperature-controlled shipping of biological samples. And yes, most of what you offer will also be available from the larger corporate entities; what makes you high-tech (and therefore incomprehensible to the ancients) isn't merely a factor of *what* you provide, but also of *how*.

It's easier to sink your talons into a fresh new company. Even assuming you haven't been a part of it since the beginning (venture capital is your friend), you have far fewer stocks to buy (assuming the company's even reached its IPO yet) and far fewer people to bribe, blackmail or blood bond before you've achieved a controlling interest or dominant position.

That said, there's a reason the elders aren't more concerned with figuring out the high-tech start-ups — high-tech start-ups ain't where the power's at. True, it's a rapidly growing field, one that the elders have wildly underestimated, and eventually it's going to threaten everything they hold. For now, though, these are still the little guys, the underdogs. If you're looking for a quick route to power, you aren't going to find it this way. If, on the other hand, you're more concerned with establishing a firm, steady base, and willing to work up from there, this may be the way to go. Note that I said *may* — the vast majority of these interests go under within the first few years. Those that survive, however, show an amazing degree of strength and resiliency.

Remember, it wasn't all that long ago (particularly as Kindred measure things) that nobody had ever heard of Microsoft....

WHAT NOW?

Small, young high-tech firms are the guerrilla warriors of the corporate battlegrounds. They don't have the men, the resources or the experience of the big boys. On the other hand, they move fast, they think and plan in new directions and can react more quickly than larger companies. Tonight's truly successful start-up might just grow up to be the massive corporation of tomorrow.

The risks are high, certainly. For every one company to successfully cross the finish line into stable operations, hundreds of other competitors stumbled at the starting gun, ran out of breath on the second lap or were shot by a sniper in the stands. Sales probably won't be as high as anticipated, unexpected cost overruns can quickly eat into your initial stockpile of capital and

THAT DOMAIN NAME IS ALREADY TAKEN

In a field in which the old guard are the outsiders, it should come as no surprise that the traditional clan-to-clan ratio in the e-business and high-tech fields is a far cry from what it is in more traditional enterprises. While a few young Ventrue, Giovanni and Lasombra have involved themselves in these particular ventures, they can't even begin to claim the sort of dominance they hold elsewhere. A few intellectual types among Clan Brujah, not surprisingly, hold a sizable chunk of the interest in the growing wave of start-ups. What is perhaps a bit more startling is that the Tremere and Toreador run them a close second, at least among Camarilla clans. The Tremere bought in because the Warlocks have always been quicker to understand new puzzles and procedures than many other Kindred. The Toreador invested because many of the clan's neonates see the twin procedures of building a new business and working with computers to be nothing less than new forms of cultural patronage.

The Followers of Set also seem to have a vested interest in the growing field of e-commerce. The ability to conduct commerce with anonymity, to rake in a substantial amount of money and set up channels of communication without the accountability of a standard business setting intrigues them. Furthermore, they've discovered the many advantages inherent in providing venture capital to a rapidly growing business; it grants carte blanche to make suggestions (and occasionally demands) further down the road.

resources, and 18 other tiny companies are trying to snare the exact same market demographic. It's difficult to worry about what sort of value your stocks will see after your IPO when you're not even sure the company's going to survive to see next month.

Assuming, however, that you've chosen wisely and affixed yourself to one of the true up-and-comers, what exactly can you do with it?

Growth Potential

While there's certainly a great deal to recommend them in the here and now, most Kindred (and most people, for that matter) are more interested in new companies for what they might become further down the road. No, you *probably* won't be the next Microsoft or America Online, but if you are, you've achieved all the benefits of running your own corporation, and you didn't have to battle any of the big boys to get it (though you'll probably end up having to battle some

of them to *keep* it; it's going to be just as appealing an idea to them as it is to you).

Over the course of years, the successful company develops an enormous network of contacts in the corporate and government sectors, and it develops a market niche that others in the Kindred community will want to exploit. All the favors, all the connections, will eventually become available to you, if you've just got the patience.

Most kine would go insane waiting, of course; but if being undead doesn't teach you patience, you're going to have a very tense eternity ahead of you.

Corporate Pull

No, you don't have the same degree of prestige that the larger corporations have with one another, but that doesn't mean you can't occasionally exert some leverage on the big boys by playing to your strengths. They probably have greater resources than you do, but it's nearly impossible for a large corporate entity to accomplish anything *quickly*. (It was AMD, after all, and not Intel, who marketed the first gigahertz chip. It may have had its flaws, but sometimes being first is all you need.) If you're developing a competing technology — or better yet, one that nobody else is currently investigating — the corporations are going to be very interested in making some sort of deal.

Sometimes you want to go ahead and make those deals. Sure, being first to market can bring in a substantial profit, but the corporations often pay handsomely if you just agree to slow production or even leak the technology to them. If your rival company also happens to represent one of your rival Kindred, you can probably squeeze the promise of a favor or two out of him for a rainy night.

You can panic the corporations further by threatening to take your new technology to the government before they can. Big government and big business usually walk hand in hand, especially in the modern nights, but that doesn't mean the folks at Capitol Hill or the Pentagon aren't going to work with some young upstart if it's to their advantage. If your new product happens to drastically improve, for instance, the accuracy of the American census, your competitors may just fall over themselves offering you favors if you'll just hold off and give them the time they need to present their own alternative. And if they *don't* make you such an offer, you still got a government contact out of the deal. Either way, you come out ahead.

Access and Information

Many banks, corporations, and even some government offices farm work to outside sources for their computer hardware, networking and Internet security needs. If this happens to be your own company's area of



expertise, you'll find yourself with easy access to corporate or financial records and data. Nearly every computer security firm leaves itself a backdoor into every system they install. Learn to access that, and the company in question won't be able to hide a thing from you.

Computers aren't by any means the only field that allows for covert gathering of data. Influence over a telecommunications concern allows you to eavesdrop on all sorts of exchanges, from modem lines to cellular conversations. If your business is a consulting firm — "efficiency experts" or onsite repair — you have by definition been granted access to a company's holdings and locations. This gives your personnel an unquestioned right to be there, yet the company itself knows little to nothing about them. This gives you a perfect

SHADOW OF THE BLACK HAND

If the balance and ratio of clans involved in the high-tech industries are turned about from where they stand in other corporate areas, it should come as no surprise that the balance of power between the sects is tilted differently here as well. Not to say that the Camarilla doesn't still hold the lion's share of influence among the "new economy" companies that harbor Kindred interest, but the Sabbat holds a lot more sway here than they do in most other businesses.

The Sabbat entered this particular arena from a position of weakness. Since a vast preponderance of Sabbat Cainites never saw mortals as especially useful, they never made the same effort to understand, much less influence, kine institutions. It's only in recent years that this outlook has begun to change within a small but growing faction of the sect, and they've been somewhat desperate to make up for the Camarilla's centuries-long lead. They have, therefore, been grabbing for fiscal and corporate power wherever they can get it — and since newer businesses and industries provide easier opportunities than older ones, the balance of newly enlightened Sabbat entrepreneurs winds up here.

In fact, it's just possible that fear of the Sabbat running unchecked in these industries might finally provide the impetus for some of the Kindred elders to get off their asses and investigate new technologies. The Sabbat isn't running unchecked, of course. It's still outnumbered by rival Camarilla and independent vampires in these fields. Regardless, most of those rivals are neonates, so the elders of the Camarilla don't put much faith in their ability to hold the barbarians at the gates.

opportunity to take a peek where you aren't normally wanted, or to dig up a bit of dirt on the corporation's own employees — or even the corporation itself. Even a seemingly unimportant bit of data picked up this way — such as the fact that every copy of Windows 2000 in the legal department has the same registration number, and is therefore pirated — can provide leverage for future endeavors.

HOSPITALS AND THE MEDICAL ESTABLISHMENT

Antiseptic white walls lock the world outside, featureless except for security-glass windows that reveal nothing but a colorless landscape of indifferent offices and impersonal recovery rooms. Mounds of paperwork smother the desks at the nurse's stations, each one advertising the salient points of the life — and quite possibly death — of another human drone. Fuzzy and laced with static, disembodied voices pour from the PA system, summoning this specialist to that bedside, or spouting "Code Blue!" and other ciphers.

You'd think that here, in what is ostensibly a place of healing, the unrelenting grind of society would recede. That this place, if no other, would be a refuge for society's walking — or crawling — wounded.

You'd be wrong, of course. There's a great deal of money to be made off human suffering. In the managerial offices of these massive hospitals, bureaucrats pore over the week's financial reports and worry only that patients will die before they've paid for their treatment. HMOs, most of whom would rather see each and every one of their clients die than pay out a single cent in benefits, call the shots, crippling those remaining doctors who've still managed to hang onto the desire to actually help their patients.

Don't have insurance? You'll be treated — the law requires it — but you're going to get the doctor who graduated at the bottom of his class, the one who's hooked himself on morphine. The medical field is exactly like every other industry — greedy. If you want the best care, you've got to be able to pay for it. Nothing comes cheap anymore, not even your own health.

FIRST, DO NO HARM

More than a few inexperienced neonates make the mistake of underestimating the power held by hospitals and medical communities. Here, they don't see anything like the enormous sums of capital or the glamour (in an economic sense) of the corporations, nor the obvious opportunities for extortion inherent in the banking and credit industries. Mention the medical establishment, and they look at you blankly. What good are doctors to the Damned?

WHO'S ON CALL?

The battle for the medical establishment is a furious one among the Kindred, but a select few clans have dominated this particular struggle — at least for the moment.

On the Camarilla side, the Tremere and Malkavian clans usually have the greatest influence in the field of medicine. Always interested in the workings of the human (and inhuman) physiology, and constantly searching for new experimental subjects, these Kindred cling like leeches to every hospital they can.

Among the Sabbat, it is the Tzimisce — most of whom would claim they couldn't care less about kine industry — who secretly prowl the back corridors and upper-floor offices of the hospitals. And while lumping the Tzimisce in with the Tremere is a wonderful way to bring yourself a hideous and painful death, the fact remains that the two clans share this interest in the field for precisely the same reasons — accessibility of raw materials.

The Setites also appreciate the uses of the medical establishment, though their interests are often less physical than those of the Tremere and Tzimisce. People in pain, the Setites have long since learned, will often agree to anything, no matter how immoral or degrading, if the person asking can just promise to make the torment stop. Some of the Serpents' most prodigal contacts — good, moral people before their accidents or illnesses — have been acquired in just such a manner.

The fact that contacts in the local hospital provide easy access to all sorts of restricted substances doesn't hurt any Kindred's feelings, either.

That's true, of course. It's equally true that a Kindred in the position to pull strings at the city's largest hospitals can accomplish things that no one in any corporation, no matter how powerful or well placed, could so much as dream of.

Masquerade Protection and Other Cover-Ups

The medical establishment's single greatest value, at least to the Kindred, is the ability to hide a multitude of sins. Sometimes young Cainites — Brujah get the worst rap for this, but it happens to everyone — lose control. Or maybe you've got the growing signs of a Sabbat incursion. Maybe you just have a madman loose in your particular urban jungle who happens to be one of the Damned. Whatever the specific cause, even the most Tradition-fearing Camarilla city is going to have the occasional exsanguinated body turn

up at the local morgues, or — even worse — living victims wheeled into the local emergency rooms. This is where access to the hospital's physicians, nurses, orderlies or receptionists can prove invaluable. Records can be altered, proving that the victim in question was admitted for something else entirely, or even destroyed, eliminating any paper trail that might prove the individual in question was ever admitted at all. Other causes of injury or death can be faked; bodies can be improperly examined or autopsy avoided altogether with the proper shuffling of papers (or corpses). Remember that as much as the Kindred hate being near an open flame, the hospital incinerator is your friend. The easiest solution is to have the coroner herself under your thumb, but it's hardly the only way.

Of course, the Masquerade isn't the only secret a Lick in the know can preserve with the proper access to hospital personnel. Corporate interests can be protected, and criminal investigations can be thwarted or sent spiraling in the wrong direction. Any situation that involves an injured person falls under your jurisdiction.

Access to Rivals' Agents and Information

Speaking of the infirm, imagine what you can do with (or to) the ghouls, agents, and other mortal liaisons of the city's Kindred. Most of the Damned fortunate enough to possess loyal servants, whether they're ghouls or simply oblivious mortals with something to gain, would prefer to place those individuals in harm's way rather than face physical danger themselves. That, combined with the penchant such retainers have for embroiling themselves in trouble, makes for pretty high on-the-job injury rate for some Kindred's lackeys.

Though exceedingly uncommon, you must be prepared to jump on these opportunities when they're presented. Most of the time, you're not going to have another Kindred's accountant lying in your recovery room. The rare times that it *does* happen, you're sitting on a veritable gold mine of leverage and information — if you can act quickly enough. You need not resort to strong-arm tactics or Disciplines, though such might occasionally prove necessary if there's a very specific piece of information you're looking for. Just learning the individual's address or place of employment can enable you to track him down later. Even something as simple as keeping track of the license plates of those who come to visit him can clue you in to who else your rival might have on his roster of contacts.

Sometimes, the very nature of Kindred associations can give away secrets about the undead, if you know how to look. If you know for a fact that the gay Korean kid in room 412 is an associate of the Ventrue who owns

the steel refinery in the city's industrial park, and if both his visitors were also effeminate Korean boys, and the ultimatum the Blue Blooded bastard sent you last year was also delivered by such an individual — well, you've probably got a pretty good idea what the gentleman's chosen blood type is, don't you? Admittedly, most situations (and most Ventrue) aren't going to be quite that obvious, but it doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to pick up on such cues when they're provided, as long as you've kept your eyes open.

Herding and Blood-Banking

Mortal accomplices may come and go, governments may rotate personnel during elections, corporations may be broken up by the Justice Department, but the Hunger is eternal. It hangs over every moment of Cainite existence, threatening to destroy everything the Kindred has worked for in a single instant of uncontrolled frenzy. But for those fortunate Kindred who have succeeded in winding their tendrils through the width and breadth of the medical establishment, the Hunger is far less of a concern. They know, no matter how bad things become, that they have an emergency store of sustenance.

Assuming the Kindred in question knows how to read a medical chart, the average hospital is practically one big buffet. Hundreds or even thousands of patients lie cooped up in their private little rooms, many of them already unconscious. A Kindred loose in the halls of medicine is fairly analogous to the kid in the candy store. And if the weakened individual proves too weak to survive the loss of a few pints of blood — well, unexpected deaths aren't precisely unheard of in hospitals, especially since it's often HMOs calling the shots instead of the doctors themselves (though you'd better make sure you have the resources to protect the Masquerade).

If the Kindred isn't averse to the idea of cold blood, hospitals also provide emergency stores in the form of blood banks. Most such institutions keep at least a moderate store of blood, for use in the emergency treatment of severe blood loss and for transfusions. While such plastic-wrapped "fast food" isn't precisely the tastiest, it keeps a long time if properly refrigerated, and it travels a lot more easily than a trunk full of duct-taped living vessels.

This isn't solely of benefit to you, either. The city's other Kindred are sometimes going to find themselves in need of emergency feeding privileges, privileges you can dole out in exchange for all sorts of favors. The Gangrel, for instance, with the urge to head out into the country for a while, or the Malkavian who incurred the prince's wrath one too many times and needs to leave town without delay; both these

Kindred, with several nights on the road ahead of them, might just be particularly grateful to anyone who might provide them with a few meal's worth of portable vitae. True, neither of them are in much of a position to do you any favors immediately; prestation has an awfully long memory.

Access to Restricted Materials

The obvious benefit to this comes in the form of drugs that are otherwise exceedingly difficult to obtain. Leaving aside the fact that many of these can bring an insanely high price on the streets, and are thus a good source of quick, relatively untraceable income, many are also useful for their other inherent properties. The

THE TIES THAT BIND

Some of you more devious power-players out there, those who have made (or intend to make) a habit of providing blood-banking services for your fellow Kindred, might be tempted to begin injecting just a wee trace of your own vitae in with the juice, in an attempt to create at least a partial bond between yourselves and all those Kindred who sup from your grail.

In a word: Don't. This definitely qualifies as a Bad Idea. Even assuming you're able to doctor the plasma bags without being detected (and that's going to be difficult, given the standard level of paranoia among Kindred), you're not going to get away with it for long. Unless you're dealing with a rank neonate, your "dinner guest" is probably going to recognize by taste that something isn't right; remember that Kindred vitae has a bouquet all its own, and feels substantially more potent when it's working its way through the system.

And once your secret's out, it's just a matter of time. Losing your client base (and thus your steady if slow supply of acquired boons) is just the beginning. If you're lucky, you'll just be dragged before the prince (or whatever local authority there might be in your city) for judgment and punishment. If you're a bit less lucky, your previous clients may just come back and kill you. Under the circumstances, quite a few princes might just grant them permission to do that, and that's assuming they bother to ask her first.

The quantity and severity of the enemies you'll make this way simply outweigh the possible benefits. Treat fairly with the other Kindred, at least in this particular regard. You'll find it works out a lot more favorably in the long run.

proper chemical stimuli can render subjects docile, even pliable. Why bother to Dominate someone and risk them remembering and questioning their strange behavior when you can inject them with enough hospital-grade morphine to make them think up is down? This is, of course, to say nothing of the leverage a Kindred can exert once he's become the primary source for a particular councilman's Percodan addiction.

But the ability to acquire nifty toys isn't limited to drugs. A Kindred with the right connections could, without a terrible degree of difficulty, gain access to sample cultures of all sorts of interesting diseases. No, you're not going to have access to the truly nasty ones like Ebola, anthrax or smallpox. These tend to be restricted to heavily guarded government and Center for Disease Control installations, and are never worth the risk of playing with, anyway. On the other hand, influenza cultures can be found at nearly every major hospital. If you're able to plan ahead and make sure you've cultivated a contact who knows his Third World diseases, you may be able to acquire even rarer materials, such as cholera (outbreaks of which, though extremely uncommon outside the poor, underdeveloped nations, are not completely unheard of in even the most modern cities).

Why on earth would a Kindred *want* to spread a such a disease? An outbreak of influenza will eventually be brought under control, but it will definitely result in a huge amount of police, paramedic and other official activity in a given geographic area in the interim. If the public knows the epidemic is the source of the problem, they're not going to question the presence of so many emergency personnel. The fact that the real reason you wanted them there was to allow the prince's people in the police and fire departments to burn out a lurking Sabbat pack is something John Q. Public need never know.

Turn it around, and these illnesses can be used as weapons. An outbreak of cholera will completely shut down a portion of the city while the CDC and other medical authorities look into it. This can temporarily cripple any of your rivals' interests or businesses located in the hot zone, especially if that particular company appears to be the source of the contagion.

You'll want to be exceedingly careful with this, of course. You're not trying to wipe out a large portion of the city's population (though admittedly you probably *can't*, not with the diseases you'll have available), and the other Kindred may take it unpleasantly if they learn that you're waging even a limited form of biological warfare on them. Still, when carefully monitored and modulated, such endeavors are sometimes worth the inherent risks involved.

Social Climbing

Hospitals are always in need of contributions. This establishment needs \$10 million to continue its research into childhood heart disease, that one needs a new facility for transplants, the other is running out of room and ER doctors, and so on. The best way to earn that money, of course, is throw a fund-raising gala that's going to draw the rich and powerful from all over the city — not because they give a damn about childhood heart disease or transplants, but because this is a good place to be seen and to show off your "generous" side.

For the Kindred looking for an "in" into the city's upper crust, this is the way to do it. Such events are the perfect place to meet and network with the scions of the capitalistic economy, the people who have the most say-so by virtue of having the most cash. Hobnobbing with the social elite opens up a whole new wealth of possibilities, opportunities that success in the business arenas, no matter how complete, simply cannot provide.

LABOR UNIONS

Not specifically a business in and of itself (though some might argue the point), organized labor is still an integral part of the business world. At least on the hypothetical, moral level, the unions are the one substantial force in the entire corporate sector that fights for the little people. Although utterly without voice in the chambers of power, the boardrooms and offices high atop downtown skyscrapers, the workers refuse to remain silent. In theory, the unions provide them with the representation that old money and new greed have denied them, outfitting them with not only a platform to air their grievances and demands and desires, but a base of power with which to negotiate.

It's all well and good, in theory; when it comes to reality, as with so much else in the modern nights, things don't work out precisely the way they should.

The labor unions of the world, as often as not, are cesspools of greed, corruption and barely restrained violence. Organized crime has so many fingers in the unions that it's nothing short of amazing that there's room for even a single member who isn't a wise guy of some sort or another. Union leaders and management have become greedy. They no longer demand from the corporations and businesses what they think is fair, instead seeking to milk those in power for all they can. Spite, too, plays a major part in the behavior of the unions. The corporations have become the enemy, and more than one union protest has dragged on long past the

LABOR INTENSIVE

It should come as little surprise that many Brujah, both in the Camarilla and among the anarchs, are quite heavily into the labor unions. The idea of power from the workers speaks to the communal Brujah consciousness, the same sense of the proletariat calling the shots that led to so many European Brujah supporting communism. The Nosferatu maintain an active interest in the unions as well; laborers often have a much better idea of what's happening behind the scenes than management believes, and the Sewer Rats relish the opportunity to acquire that information without the "higher" clans ever figuring out where they're finding it. Among the Sabbat, it is once again the Lasombra who can claim the greatest interest in the unions. The Sabbat Brujah, all told, are far too violent to successfully operate behind a kine organization. The Lasombra appreciate the anticorporate stance that most organized labor seems to take; it puts them at loggerheads with the Ventrue and other Camarilla business types, a position that they very much enjoy taking.

The Giovanni, on the other hand, often surprise people who assume that their occasional New World forays into organized crime automatically grant them a high level of influence in the unions. The truth is that the Necromancers have comparatively little to do with these organizations. This is due primarily to a combination of two factors. One, the Giovanni are normally in competition, not cooperation, with the Mafia, and the Mafia still holds a vast amount of sway with the unions. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, the Giovanni don't really have all that much use for organized labor. Their efforts, when they're aimed at the world of the living at all, tend to focus more on high finance than on the common worker.

Finally, in the nights since their clanwide drop in numbers, the Ravnos — or those few who maintain a regular haven in the industrialized areas — have developed a surprising interest in the unions, and for much the same reason as the Nosferatu. Many Ravnos have grown understandably paranoid in recent nights, and contacts and allies within organized labor aid them in keeping an eye on the corporate structure — which often translates into the Kindred elite in any given city — without bringing themselves to the attention of those in power.

point where the corporations would have given in, for no purpose other than to hurt business that much more.

The truth, however, is that the unions no longer have the power they once did. Public sympathies have shifted. Those who once firmly backed the poor, oppressed laborers now curse those same strikers for delaying airplane flights and creating a rise in the cost of automotive parts. As other factions of organized crime continue supplanting the Mafia — long the true patron of organized labor — the unions find themselves being muscled around once more by the corporations they could formerly stand up to. Still, the labor union is far from dead, and they still hold in their grease-streaked hands the power to make the corporate world take heed — so long as the request is properly phrased.

UNION DUES

Other than providing benefits and leverage, a labor union doesn't actually *do* much of anything. It doesn't generate a product or service that fills a consumer niche or — more importantly — a Kindred need you might exploit. It doesn't generate even as much income as a small law firm or dot-com, much less the staggering sums of wealth you might acquire in the corporate or banking sectors. So why in Caine's name would you ever want to bother with an institution like this?

Corporate Leverage

The first and most obvious advantage to cultivating influence in a labor union is simply that you can use it in the same way its members do — as a hammer held over the heads of certain corporations and industries. Every firm, every plant, every institution that employs physical laborers probably has a union, and that union has power. Airlines and automobile manufacturers need people on the line to put the pieces together, repairmen to fix them when they break down. Shipping concerns need dockhands to load cargo. Even actors and teachers are unionized, should the need ever arise for you to flex your muscle in those particular fields. The threat of union action, shouted loudly enough and to the right people, can sometimes evoke drastic changes on the part of management. A strike can financially cripple a company, often causing lasting or permanent damage if the timing is just right. A strike by airplane mechanics, for instance, is damaging to the airline even at the best of times. If it happens during the peak of the holiday season, it becomes a blow from which the company won't recover for years. Once you've managed to convince the unions to strike, it becomes a matter of what your objectives are. If you're trying to wring concessions out of the corporation in question — or the Kindred involved with it — this is the time

to present your demands. If, on the other hand, you're simply trying to damage the entity in question, you can sit back and enjoy the show.

Strikes are massive, public things, and they draw enormous amounts of attention. This is not a weapon to be wielded subtly, or often, and there's practically no way to do it without impacting interests far outside your immediate industry. A strike by the workers at a steel plant doesn't just cripple the local steel industry, but the automotive industry, construction and uncountable others besides.

Furthermore, because union action involves such an enormous number of people, you're not going to be able to create one solely on the basis of your own personal concerns. It doesn't matter how much leverage you have over the people in charge. You might have in your possession signed and documented proof that the local union leader shot Kennedy from the grassy knoll, went home, raped his own daughter and molested the family dog, and it still wouldn't be enough. You will not be able to get a union to strike unless the workers already have some serious grievances with the company. It's a decision that has to be ratified by too many people — and impacts the livelihoods of too many people — for the unions to ever take such a step lightly.

Of course, odds are pretty good that the workers *do* already have some issues to take up with management, issues that you can exploit to get the results you want. Remember that most large companies these nights couldn't care less about their workers, and the employees know it. Creating a strike out of whole cloth is a daunting task. Exacerbating and exaggerating problems that already exist until you can push the union into such an action — that's easier.

Mob Connections

Not every labor union is connected to the Mafia, any more than every lawyer is corrupt or every politician is on the take. Nevertheless, the stereotype comes from somewhere, and a Kindred with connections to the right unions can often continue up the chain of contacts until he reaches the "made men" who call the shots.

Any neonate who wants to survive long enough to see what undeath has to offer had better show some respect for the power with which she's about to shake hands. The Mafia is dangerous, even to the Kindred, and the fact that the union can supply you with a means to contact them doesn't for one minute mean they're going to have any interest in hearing what you've got to say. Once you've been introduced to La Cosa Nostra, you'd better be prepared to talk not only quickly but very, very persuasively.

IS SILENCE GOLDEN?

So just how quiet are you being about your newfound power? Is it common knowledge among the Kindred that you're now the man to see about air travel, or covering up potential Masquerade breaches at the local ER, or talking the Construction Workers Local 147 into going back to work? Or have you been trying to keep yourself shrouded in the secrecy that so many Cainites seem to prefer, pulling the strings of Crichton-Lawler and Northwest Confederated Banking from behind the curtain?

It's not an easy choice to make. As with so much else regarding the Kindred (and business in general), there are distinct advantages either way.

Should you choose to keep your presence secret, it makes it substantially more difficult for your enemies to target your assets. How do you strike at the holdings of a rival when you don't know precisely what those holdings are? More to the point, you can fend off attempts to usurp control of your influence by other Kindred because they won't know from what quarter your countermeasures might come.

On the other hand, if the other Kindred don't know what you're involved in, you've lost a substantial amount of leverage in the game of prestation. How do you expect them to come to you for favors if you haven't made it known that you're the one to see in any given sphere of influence? Not even the most desperate Cainite is going to be trusting enough to agree to owe a boon anonymously. Public (in Kindred terms) knowledge of who you are and what you're involved in puts you in a much better position to play politics — but it also makes you an easier target.

As with everything else in the Jyhad, it could be a matter of unlife and death — and it's entirely in your hands.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

The options presented to you so far barely scratch the surface of Kindred involvement in mortal affairs of business. For every industry mentioned here, a hundred others wait to be tapped. Want easy access to the movers and shakers of the city, the politicians and fat cats and other scions of high society? Involve yourself in the largest of your city's charitable organizations. Trying to enlarge the underground networks for your Nosferatu brethren? Construction companies are the way to go. Imagine what an enterprising young Kindred could

accomplish with an advertising company under her direction. Or a movie studio. An insurance company. A nationwide security and private investigation firm, like the Pinkerton Agency. If the kine put money into it, the Kindred can pull power out of it. Don't allow yourself to be limited to what you've read in here; this is intended only as a starting point. When it comes down to it, your only *real* weapon in the Jyhad is creativity. Think of what the elders haven't thought of, and exploit it.

And Remember — business in the modern nights *never* favors the little guy.





CHAPTER TWO: SOCIAL CLIMBING

As we ascend the social ladder, viciousness wears a thicker mask.

— Erich Fromm

At its broadest possible definition, “society” refers simply to the civilization in which humans live and Kindred... exist. Using this definition, claiming that your goal is to attain influence “in society” is analogous to claiming that you reside “on Earth.” In other words, pretty much meaningless.

“Society,” of course, has narrower connotations. It most commonly refers to certain sectors — usually rich, powerful, flamboyant sectors — of civilization. What do the words “high society” conjure up? Images of black-tie soirees and evenings at the theater. Gala fundraisers attended by people who turn enough profit in a month to run the charity in question for an entire fiscal year. Cutting-edge fashion and elegant nostalgia. Very dry martinis, stirred, not shaken (I never understood why Bond ordered his the other way). This is the breed of mortal that runs — or thinks it runs — the world as we know it. It is to this level of social decadence that many of tonight’s *nouveau riche* and social climbers aspire. And it is these circles to which those Kindred who would seek to “control” kine society, as if such a thing

were possible, flock, drawn like moths to a flame — or like fish to a brightly-colored lure.

Of course, no matter how much power they may have — and they have much of it — this sort represents only a single facet of modern culture. For all that humanity seems to have progressed from the feudal system of the middle ages, for all that slavery has been officially done away with, the countries of the Western world labor under an unspoken caste system nearly as strict as those found in less “advanced” nations. Just because society’s so-called less desirable elements aren’t labeled untouchables doesn’t mean they’re not treated that way. A substantial line of demarcation separates high and low society (it’s called the middle class), and odds are good that you’re never going to see figures from opposite sides of the line acknowledge each other at all, unless it’s over an incredible photo-op or as one drags a filthy squeegee over the windshield of the other’s car. Any Kindred with half a brain will be aware of this sociological divide, but only the wisest Kindred know better than to limit her options. Much to the surprise (and chagrin) of both Kindred and kine blue-bloods, you’ll find

distinct advantages to patronizing both halves of modern culture, services the poor can offer that the rich never could. Influence in society must come from both sides if you want to build a truly stable base of power; support yourself with only one, and you're much more likely to find yourself toppled.

Influence over mortal society, high and low, is a subtle thing. Of course, that applies to Kindred dabbling in everything, to one extent or another, but it's worth paying special attention to here. A Cainite with a contact in government can sometimes push decisions through intervening red tape. One with massive corporate influence usually has the leverage to demand or extort what she wants. A Kindred with connections to La Cosa Nostra — well, get in his way, and you may very well find yourself at the bottom of the river. But what about the Kindred whose focus is on the ebb and flow of mortal society, who rides the tides of fashion and fad? She simply doesn't have the muscle, the leverage, the power of her contemporaries.

Or so it seems. The truth is, influence in society is the more subtle side to the "harder" influences of corporate and government power. It is less direct, often less immediate, and may require more effort before you start to see some returns. Yet, like the supernatural Kindred gifts of charisma, it often proves advantageous in the long run, and often leaves behind a much smaller trail of irate allies and angry pawns. The rising politician who jumps when you clap because you've got documented proof that he cheated the IRS for ten years running may do as you ask, but he's not going to be happy about it, and he's likely to stick a knife (figuratively or literally) in your back the moment it's turned. The one who doesn't mind doing you an occasional favor because he enjoys your parties and because you've given generously to his campaign fund may not go quite as far out on a limb for you, but he's also not actively looking for a way to push you over the edge.

The biggest problem with gathering this sort of influence is that you haven't got a convenient starting point. There is no CEO of the city's wealthy, no governing board of the poverty-stricken. The old adage "It takes money to make money" certainly applies to society's upper crust; if you haven't already got a fortune, or at least a name that was once connected with such a fortune, you're likely to find the doors of those in power extremely difficult to open. At the opposite end of the spectrum, it's relatively easy to develop individual contacts within the dregs of society — but while having the homeless fellow who lives under the overpass at the Commerce Street exit beholden to you might prove useful, it's not likely to make it any easier for you to expand your influence.

But hey, if it was easy, anyone could do it.

What follows is a brief primer on the top and the bottom, the upper echelons and lowest depths of the

Western world's social strata. How to get yourself involved, what these people are (and are not) good for, and which other Kindred you'll most likely have to deal with once you're there — basically, everything a hungry young Kindred needs to make his mark in society. Be careful, though; these are the masses — both poor and unwashed, and coifed and perfumed — of humanity. Some of the jockeying for status is brutal enough to make even the harpies wince, and just because they don't have your fangs doesn't mean they won't bite.

STORYTELLERS TAKE HEED!

We certainly don't want to discourage you from making full use of the ideas presented in this chapter, but you should be aware that, in many ways, properly running a story about gaining influence in society is more difficult than running other sorts of political chronicles. Strings can be pulled in government, in the corporate sector and on the streets. This is not so amid the labyrinthine culture-within-a-culture that is so much a part of society itself (and high society in particular). Everything is give-and-take, favors exchanged and reputations built and ruined. A character should never be able to call up a contact among the city's rich and powerful and "have something done." It's not like owning your own company or your own senator — you're asking for help, not calling the shots. Everything is either a favor granted or a favor repaid.

At its basic level, it's almost as if your players' characters were part of a second political scene not unlike the game of prestaton played by the Camarilla Kindred. They may not call them boons, and you're unlikely to find yourself staked and left for the sun if you fail to honor the rules of the game, but it's still roughly analogous. Ultimately, it means more work for the Storyteller and the players both. Someone needs to keep track of who owes who, of what favors have been called in and which are still looming. Additionally, the Storyteller really needs to know exactly who the characters can call on. Do they know someone who's got the contacts (and more importantly, the leverage) at city hall to have that apartment building condemned? Do they know someone who's got enough pull to procure that strange Nosferatu the sold-out opera tickets she's demanded in exchange for her information?

It can be a blast, playing a game that involves this sort of web of favors involving mortals, and not just among the Kindred. But be aware of what it entails before you take it on. If you don't think you're up to it, have your players stick with the more direct forms of societal influence.

HIGH SOCIETY

To the “have-nots,” who primarily view the lives (and unlives) of the “haves” through the filth-encrusted lens of Hollywood and television, high society is a world of pure privilege. Money carpets the halls, garages spontaneously generate gas-guzzling luxury cars, vintage champagne and the finest vitae pour forth from gilded kitchen faucets. Celebrities schmooze with politicians, the idle rich with the movers and shakers of civilization, and no one has a care in the world, because they’re all loaded enough to bribe even the mosquitoes to go pester someone else.

That, of course, is what they want you to think. The power of society’s darlings isn’t actually built on money, though heaps of dollars certainly don’t hurt matters any. The truth is that a good chunk of their power is entirely illusory. They’re only powerful as long as the little people (that would be you and me, if you haven’t gotten that yet) *think* they’re powerful.

And since so much of what makes them who — and what — they are is based on reputation, the parties and gatherings these people throw are rife with enough character assassins and cordial venom to shame the bitchiest of Toreador.

Still want to get yourself tangled up in this school of social piranha? Then pay attention; they’re damned useful people, if you can survive your first introduction into the swarm.

UP THE LADDER

So far, all you’ve seen is the downside to high society, how hard it is to get involved, how vicious a playing field it is, how many powerful Kindred — many of whom are elders — have arrived before you. It’s enough to make even the most stubborn neonate start to think that her efforts are better directed elsewhere.

Don’t. For those tenacious enough to pull this off, the rewards are commensurate with the exertions required to get there. What follows are only a select few suggestions as to what uses you can put these people to; I’m sure a few minutes of thought on your part will produce a lot more, but these should start the ball rolling.

Wealth

In a word, naturally. They say that in America, for instance, five percent of the population controls 95 percent of the wealth. It’s that lucky five percent you’re dealing with now, and expect plenty of that wealth to go around. This isn’t nearly so important to those lucky Kindred among us who’ve already got bank accounts so big they need an extra deposit slip to handle all the zeroes. But for those of us who aren’t



UNLIFESTYLES OF THE RICH AND FAMOUS

The reason, one would assume, that you want to assert yourself among the city's high-and-mighty is because that's where the power lies. You were probably smart enough to figure this next part out anyway, but here it is: You ain't the only one to hit on this little idea, and many of them have been here a lot longer than you have. You think family dynasties like the Kennedys go back a ways? Imagine the sort of social standing you could have if you'd personally been around longer than any single one of those familial tribes.

First and foremost, clawing their way to the pinnacle of the cultural heap with bile-coated fangs and manicured talons, you've got the Toreador. These social butterflies have more long-term mortal contact than just about any other clan (except maybe the Brujah), and the good opinion of the mortal herds around them is quite nearly as important to them as are the opinions of the Kindred. Of all the clans, the Toreador are the most likely to interject themselves into the posh milieu of the upper crust just because they want to, rather than out of any attempt to gain something out of it. Of course, if you take that to mean that they won't use their contacts and leverage to the fullest, you deserve whatever they do to you.

Those self-proclaimed rulers, the mighty and exalted Ventrue, are the runners-up. Nearly as great a presence in high society as the Toreador, the Blue Bloods are, by and large, a bit more traditional in their endeavors. That means they usually try to ingratiate themselves with the rich and famous because they've got something to gain from it, and not due to any lingering need to fit in with the upper classes. And the Brujah are up there, too. Most of those Licks who still refuse to see the Rabble as anything more than leather-clad bikers are stunned to see them hobnobbing with the best of them, but it happens. Happens frequently, in fact. Rebel doesn't mean stupid or illiterate, now, does it?

You're not going to see much of the Black Hand in this area. Even those Sabbat who get off on playing with their food tend to prefer the more direct approach. Since high society is all about exchanging favors and who you know, it's more the elder Lasombra's *métier*, as well as a few of the less twisted Tzimisce and the Toreador *antribu*. Which doesn't mean that you're not going to find non-Camarilla Licks playing at being Jay Gatsby. The Giovanni circulate through these crowds like extras out of *Dangerous Liaisons*. The Followers of Set have long since discovered that people with more money than God tend to get bored very quickly, and there's nothing those Serpents like better than rich, jaded boredom. It's like a Christmas present to them, and a growing number of them are picking at the ribbons.

staggering under the weight of our wallets, this is an excellent source of funds.

Of course, they're not just going to give you money. Sure, most of you probably have ways to encourage compliance, but if you really think you can just Dominate the Trump into giving you a million-dollar check, I dare you to go try it and see how long it takes to come back and bite you on the ass.

Still, you can accomplish this. If you're working on bringing a young company off the ground, high society is a great place to go trolling for capital. Your ideas don't even have to be all that good, so long as they *sound* good. Convince the rich old lady that you've got a feasible — and profitable — idea for the "next big thing," you can probably milk her for a hefty chunk of change before her lawyers and accountants manage to reign her in. Hell, three years ago, you could just walk into a room full of tuxedos and whisper "Internet" and they'd throw handfuls of cash at you. Of course, you'll want to actually have a start-up in the works. Nothing puts a crimp in a Kindred's unlifestyle than daylight courtroom appearances on fraud charges, and if you've been feeding the nice old lady nothing

but bullshit, her lawyers are going to find that out. They can haul your ass in for conning her, but they can't sue you because she made a dumb decision. Fine line, don't cross; you know the drill by now.

What if you're an artist? The social clans love this one. The nights of nobility patronizing the gifted painter or lyrical poet are still upon us, and the truly talented (or magnetic) artisan may still be fortunate enough to find somebody with delusions of taste and too much money. Then again, you may truly be worthy of patronage. That, however, is a matter of taste I'll leave for you to quibble about yourselves.

And then, of course, there's the Pretty Woman method. Not that I recommend you going around subjecting every rich man, woman and child in sight to the blood bond (especially since the odds are pretty good that one of them is already in thrall to someone nastier than you are), but the occasional judicious use of artificial affection seriously loosens the purse strings.

Every single one of these techniques could easily benefit from a selective use of Presence. In fact, this is exactly what I was talking about earlier, with my "Presence — subtle, Dominate — sledgehammer" spiel.

Dominance leaves people with questions. "Why did I just write her that check?", "Why can't I remember anything about last night?", "Why on earth did I let him do that to me in front of the guests?" Bad news. All they're going to remember with Presence, though, is that they liked you, they really liked you. And that just makes it easier for you to convince them to give you what you want.

Make sure that you're very careful with whatever wealth you do glean from the upper classes this way. Always remember that your source could dry up at any moment — damn those accountants and their advice, anyway — and don't squander what you've managed to gather.

Connections

This, more than wealth, is the most common reason for Kindred interest in high society. Mortals — and Kindred, too, but let's not get into that — are attracted to money. It's like a pheromone. And powerful people feel the attraction all the stronger, since they need money to keep themselves powerful.

Put more simply: Rich people know powerful people.

It's very much a "jack of all trades, master of none" situation. No, you're not going to be able to tell Senator What's-Her-Name to do what you want, *now*, the way you could if you had influence over her personally. You won't be able to have ownership of that lot transferred into your ghoul's name as quickly as you could if you had your fingers in City Hall. You can't put the word out that the law firm of Grant and Cleburne must lose their current case.

On the other hand, while you may not have the same degree of influence as a Kindred who's devoted his attention to a specific arena, you've got a much wider field to play with. Once you've made it big with the jetsetters, odds are pretty good that various people who run in your social circles will have some amount of clout in all these areas. The senator may not know you from a hole in the wall, but if you spend an evening a week drinking cocktails (so to speak) with her largest campaign contributor and celebrity spokesman, you can certainly get a request onto her desk. And you may not "own" the chairman of Crichton-Lawler, but you attended his daughter's coming-out party. You're asking your contacts to ask favors of their contacts, so you'll certainly owe them a favor in exchange; but the job's still getting done, isn't it?

It's precisely because of this wide range of influence provided by society's upper crust that this is often a stepping stone to larger things. It's far easier to extend your reach into other arenas — acquiring your own corporation, for instance, or suborning a local city official — from a position in high society than it is when you're still a no-name Lick off the streets. Gossip in the

world of the rich is a wonderful thing; these are the people who hear that the councilwoman's stepping out on her husband or that the VP of marketing has a 2,000-dollar-a-day habit. They might be tempted to squander such tidbits in a simple war of prestige; you, of course, know how to make far more productive use out of them.

Protection

The simple fact is, for all that most governments claim that the laws apply to everyone equally, some people can buy more equality than others. Sure, the IRS and the DEA need to take down a fat cat every now and again, just to keep the plebes happy, but by and large law enforcement is more concerned with the street-level dealers and random car-jackings than with the sins of the modern aristocracy. The words of the day — and the night — are status quo.

This, then, is the best place to be when things go south. No, you still don't want to leave a trail — of paper or of bodies — leading right to your door. Hungry as the media are for headlines, not even the most corrupt cop can ignore something that obvious, no matter who the suspect in question may be. Most of the time, though, the police aren't going to pursue a line of inquiry that may put them in trouble with the powers that be.

Even more to the point, if you've thoroughly enmeshed yourself in a web of favors, the rest of the city's elite aren't going to want to see you get taken down, either by the police in a criminal matter or by an up-and-coming rival in their own midst. Those who owe you will hope to repay their debt by standing by you; those whom you owe will realize that you can't repay them from jail, poverty or whatever the consequences of this particular matter may be. The combined whims of two dozen power brokers make one hell of a safety net.

Celebrity

Most of the Damned hope that Andy Warhol was wrong. Most of us don't want fifteen *seconds* of fame, much less our allotted fifteen minutes. There's nothing (most) blood-sucking night-creatures fear so much as the spotlight. But fame has its advantages, and if we can't claim them for ourselves, the next best thing is to frequent the company of those who can.

Celebrities meet people, people who even the rest of the rich folks can't approach. They speak for charitable organizations, for politicians and for pet causes — and that means they can introduce you, if you ask nicely. Being so-and-so's friend can be almost as useful as actually being so-and-so, and it doesn't warrant your face in the tabloids.

Besides, celebrities often have fans and groupies flocking around them, and some few of them might just be funneled into a personal herd if you have the

presence (or Presence) to draw their attention away from their original infatuation. And no one will question them hanging out with you, since you hang out with their favorite celebrity. Convenient, no?

Manipulating Trends

I'm sure you've noticed by now how unimaginably stupid most trends seem to those who aren't caught up in them. Who cares what name's printed on the tag on your underwear? What the hell use do you have for an SUV? And for the love of God, why would you want to be so damn skinny you look more like a corpse than most of the undead? And yet, these things become popular somehow, don't they?

It's that whole illusory power thing. Boil it down, you're left with this: People do stuff to be more like celebrities and rich people because they think they're supposed to want to be like celebrities and rich people. It's a case of envy beating up common sense, making it eat dirt and go stand in the corner. You care who designed your clothes because you want to be like the other people who wear his gear. You drive an SUV because all the other successful people drive SUVs. And you want to weigh in at 80 pounds and wear a size 0 dress because that's what Callista Flockhart and Sarah Michelle Gellar weigh, and they're richer than you, more successful than you, and probably get more ass than you do.

Put yourself in the proper place among the celebrities and well-to-do, and you can help direct these things. Something becomes popular because this pop star, that actor and some other popular politician are doing it. Even if you yourself don't have the fame to make a new fashion or activity the "in thing" — and considering your nocturnal unlifestyle and liquid diet, it's probably best that you aren't all that famous — any Kindred active in high society undoubtedly knows people who are. Convince them to do it, and you'll soon have a sizable proportion of the kine herds following suit.

All of this begs the question, though, as to why you'd want to do this. That one, I can't much help you with. I don't own a fashion empire, or the local Ford assembly line, or have a particular fondness for that bright orange that was all the rage last summer. If I did, though, I could certainly see why I'd want to pull stunts of this sort, and you've probably got interests that I don't. Hell, if nothing else, maybe you could reinvigorate the goth movement. Damn, but those people made it easy to feed.

Interestingly, for all that this seems to just scream "Toreador," the Ventrue are most frequent trend-manipulators. Enough of them have feeding requirements that are impacted by fashion and fad to make this a most attractive option for the Blue Bloods.

Reputation as Tool and Weapon

This is the harpies' game, pure and simple. The war of words. Be careful here. Attempting to destroy someone like this and failing can be just as damaging as if they'd launched a successful attack on you.

Remember what I said about gossip? The information picked up in the swirl of "cultured" conversation doesn't have to be used just for the sake of blackmail or extortion. Sometimes you just want to see somebody crushed, pure and simple. This'll do it almost as fast as a Potence-driven bludgeon, and it leaves less of a mess. Because the movers of society are so dependent on their reputation with the teeming masses to maintain their power, they're incredibly sensitive to reputation within their own ranks as well. It's expected that those in power have a rather sizable stockpile of skeletons in the closet — but it simply doesn't do to let the specifics out. It's gauche.

Depending on the precise makeup of the high society around you, it could be any little thing that brings a rival's reputation crashing down around his ears. Certainly revealing a penchant for pedophilia or heavy criminal contacts would do the trick. Some of the "elite" are so sensitive to status, though, that the discovery that a rival's fortune is newly made in electronics, rather than dating back generations, or that he invested in a company that folded ahead of schedule are also enough to shred his reputation past the point of repair. Tonights aristocracy don't care about value and they don't care about ability; it's all about appearance, their own little private Masquerade. Someone who looks bad, is bad. Ain't reputation a bitch?

And the best thing about all this is that a bad reputation is a socially transmitted disease. Destroy someone's rep, and their entire support group's going to quietly (or not so quietly) dry up and disappear. No one wants to be associated with the outcast for fear of being condemned right along with him. No one's going to help him, do him any favors or even be caught dead (or undead) speaking with him. I can think of no quicker way to make a society darling *persona non grata* in the halls of power.

The flip side to this, of course, is that if you can garner yourself a good reputation, you'll find a lot more people will go out of their way to help you. Favor rubs off almost as easily as disfavor, after all, and a rising star's coattails are always big enough for one more rider.

DO YOU HAVE AN INVITATION?

The catch — you knew there was a catch, didn't you? — is making it past the doorman (literally as well as figuratively). These people don't just open their homes to some guy off the street. If you're rich and

famous, you can probably make enough of a splash to earn their attention by throwing a few big bashes or contributing to a few pet causes — but then, if you're rich and famous, odds are pretty good you're already a part of this incestuous little society, or at least in touch with those who are. Maybe they haven't already opened their door to you, but at least they haven't raised the bridge and released the hounds.

Maybe you can attract society's notice with a display of some kind, sort of like the artist I mentioned earlier. But let's be realistic, okay? Most of us can't tell Shakespeare from the back of a cereal box, and we think Rembrandt is a kind of toothpaste. The vast majority of people (to say nothing of Kindred) lack anything in the way of the artistic skill it would take to have our work shown anywhere other than our parents' refrigerator.

You might — and this is an awfully big "might" — be able to start small and work your way up. Try to make some sort of impact in a pet charity of theirs. Get close to a servant or an employee. Hell, maybe see if you can't work for them in some capacity; it's demeaning, yeah, but it puts you in proximity. The problem with this method is that it takes forever, and that's assuming it works at all. So many of them have trained themselves never to notice the "help" that you could probably drink their entire household staff dry in front of them and still remain unseen.

That's an exaggeration.

As much as I hate to encourage this sort of thing, this situation may best be solved by more heavy-handed (that means "Discipline-oriented," for the subtlety-impaired among you) tactics. The trick is to have the chance to mingle with these people, to get them to notice you, to think of you as part of their circle. If that means you have to give the doorman an extra "nudge" to let you in, then that's what you've got to do. Presence is your friend here; Dominating these people can lead to all sorts of problems, though you should be able to get away with it occasionally if you're discreet. Once you're in, you're probably all right; these people put great trust in their lackeys. If you got past the tuxedo-clad bruiser at the door, obviously you're supposed to be there, so no one's going to question you as long as you took pains to look the part. Then it's just a matter of turning on the charm — be it natural or otherwise — and making sure the host knows who you are and wants to see you again.

Oh, a quick word of warning. The genteel folk don't gather in small numbers. Parties, charity events, political dinners — they all involve lots and lots of kine in an enclosed space. Feed before you go. One poorly timed frenzy can ruin your whole evening.

SOME THINGS MONEY CAN'T BUY

So what if you're rich and not famous? Merely having money — unless you're talking about enough to buy a handful of undeveloped nations — isn't enough to get you noticed. A lot of the new breed of rich person made her millions off Internet start-ups and high-tech companies, industries that the old guard just doesn't respect yet. Money's a useful tool for attracting the attention of high society, but you still have to do something with it.

Your best bet is to finance something. Sure, you could open a nightclub or a restaurant, but while those are probably going to endear you to the lower classes, they aren't generally the sort of places that draw accolades from the modern aristocracy.

Art galleries are always good options. Make sure you've got some good stuff to show — the more *avant-garde* the better — and arrange (via Presence and bribes, if you must) for some favorable word of mouth. If your gallery has any luck in becoming the place to see and be seen, even if it's only for a short while, you've hooked at least a segment of the upper class. Granted, the gallery's probably going to operate at a loss — most of those places do, even considering the sorts of people they attract — but if the suits are fighting to get in so they can schmooze with the right people, it's serving its purpose just fine.

Charities are another safe bet. You don't have to start your own, though you'll find all sorts of advantages to doing so if that's really an option. Just find out which ones are popular right now and let it be known that you give generously. Even if the mere fact that you've got a common interest with the well-to-do doesn't draw their eyes, you'll certainly be invited to all the organization's dinners and events. Once you're there, all you've got to do is start shaking the right hands and parroting the right catchphrases.

And, of course, if you happen to be in a position to pull strings with a major corporation or government office, you can always make your introductions by doing someone a favor. But since the majority of you haven't reached that stage of influence in any given arena, that's probably not a viable option. Write it down on your "to do" list, though.

THE DIRECT APPROACH

Just because you've followed my advice and had your first taste of influence over the gentility doesn't mean you can just sit back and wait for the favors to come pouring in. This is about appearances, remember? That means you've got to keep those appearances up. Attend the theater and the opera. Show your face at various balls and dinners. Put in appearances at parties. Be a part of the scene. This is an entirely social game you're playing. If that's not your thing, you probably haven't made it this far anyway, but it still bears repeating: If you're not absolutely secure in your ability to blend in, to stay in control, to maintain the Masquerade, then this undertaking isn't for you. Go shoot at some Sabbath or something; you'll be killed just as quickly, but at least you won't take the rest of us down with you.

Involving yourself in high society is probably something that you want to do in person, rather than working through ghouls and proxies. This is a very personal-contact-oriented arena. It doesn't do you any good to have a prized ghoul accumulate a dozen favors from the wealthy and powerful, only to lose the ghoul in a car accident or due to a misunderstanding with the local anarchists. As difficult as it is to make an impact in the upper class — especially without the benefits of Presence, which most ghouls are unlikely to possess — you've really got all your eggs in one very fragile basket if you go this route.

This is not to say that there aren't some hefty difficulties to be worked around if you involve yourself directly. The most obvious — and potentially the most destructive — is that bothersome thing called daylight. Not every function you'll be invited to is going to begin after sunset. The first or second such invite can be regretfully declined without hassle; by the time you've reached your seventh or eighth, you're going to start drawing some odds looks unless you've got a brilliantly polished cover story.

Never forget that these people are powerful. Maybe not as much as they think they are, and maybe not as compared to the movers and shakers among the Kindred, but nevertheless, this isn't a segment of civilization that you want upset at you. By directly involving yourself in their world, you run the risk of suffering the full brunt of the backlash should anyone ever turn these techniques around on you, stripping you of your reputation and status. It might seem safer, on the surface, to let a ghoul take the risk, since your ghouls are by definition more expendable than you are. Still, while you may prefer not to take the risks yourself, the odds are good that your ghoul's never going to attain the power you crave at all, and that does you no good whatsoever.

LOW SOCIETY

Is there such a term as "low society?" Screw it; there is now.

Low society is not precisely the exact opposite of high society. It doesn't refer merely to the poverty-stricken, junkies and crack heads, though these walking snacks are certainly included in the definition. Perhaps a better definition would be the "common folk." Not necessarily those who are starving, but simply those who don't have enough to ever approach the world of the rich and powerful.

Yes, it includes the homeless — but also those who run the shelters. Those living in crack-house apartments and middle-class housing. Movie theaters and pool halls, truckers and soccer moms. Everybody, in essence, who's utterly unimportant.

Sound useless, don't they? You let the Ventrue, the Toreador and all the others keep right on thinking that. Truth is, the people at the bottom rung can do things for you that those clinging to the top cannot.

First off, there's a damn sight more of these people. When your two categories are "disgustingly rich" and "everyone else," it doesn't take a calculator to figure out which side of the line the largest part of the population sits on. Yet there are fewer people to notice when Joe Normal starts acting strange — or vanishes entirely — or at least fewer people with the power to do anything about it.

Keeping that in mind, don't underestimate the power of the common folk. That's what your rivals are probably doing, and that's why you've got the advantage — if you know how to grab it.

THE WORKING CLASS

What do you do with them, then? After all, we've pretty much defined low society as meaning any and all people who don't have access to power or wealth. Seems like we've classified them right out of any modicum of use, doesn't it?

Not at all. Everybody's good for something, so long as you know how to take advantage of them. I'll give you a few suggestions here — but considering that you can probably figure out a new and interesting use for almost every mortal you meet, this should be considered a jumping-off point at most.

Herd

Yeah, you hear all about those elders having their own private herds of kine, just waiting to get munched on at the Kindred's whim, don't you? Makes you downright envious as you creep your way through the Rack or spend tedious hours seducing a likely looking (and moderately intoxicated) sorority girl, doesn't it?



How do you think your elders acquired that herd, genius? It's not as though there's a large population of mortals with necks craned upward just begging us to bite them.

Unless you spend every waking hour hobnobbing with the upper crust — and probably not even then — you'll want to draw most of your herd from the poorer, less conspicuous portions of society. The Beast being what it is, you *will* eventually take too much from one of your herd. If you're lucky, you'll only put them in the hospital for a few days, but odds are you're going to kill one eventually. In either case, the abrupt hospitalization or disappearance of a cab driver or a housewife is going to draw substantially less attention than if you've accidentally offed the mayor's tennis partner.

Even among the downtrodden, though, it's not particularly easy to assemble a group that doesn't mind being bled on a regular basis. It's not as if you can just walk up and pay them for the privilege, not if you expect to see too many more sunsets. More on this later.

Be aware of a rotten underside to this, by the way. Your herd is an advantage; theirs is a weak spot. It takes a lot of snooping and detective work and a whole shitload of luck, but if you can pinpoint the members of a rival's herd you've got some serious leverage, especially if the poor sucker in question happens to be

Ventruel. You'll probably have to have the Kindred in question followed — but it's just possible, if the right word is dropped in your ear by one of your people on the street, that you might locate at least one member of his herd first, and use him as a starting point in locating the others.

Once you have located the herd, you've got a few options. The subtle approach, of course, is just to keep your eyes (or your ghouls' eyes) on the people in question, which is an invaluable tool in tracking the comings and goings of your rival. Stronger tactics, like bonding or even killing the herd-members, aren't normally recommended, since there's far too great a chance of starting an all-out war that way. Not to mention the fact very few Kindred are going to accept the idea of coincidence if every one of their herd vanishes or dies in an "accident."

This can happen to you, too, so watch your back.

Information

Poor people have access to all sorts of useful knowledge, stuff you just can't get from the millionaires and movie stars. The homeless guy under the bridge downtown won't be able to give you stock tips or guess which way the governor's going to go on the latest bill up before the State. But he's almost certainly going to have a pretty good idea of when the shift change is at the local

UNCOMMON FOLK

Every last one of the Kindred is involved with the lower echelons of society in one way or another. It's not like you can avoid them; they're everywhere. Every time you go out hunting for sustenance, every time you seduce, bribe or bully your way into someplace you're not supposed to go, every time you buy a bit of research or an unlicensed .38, you're most likely interacting with these sorts of people. But for a lot of the Damned, that's all they are — food, or at best individual resources. Only a select few of the clans seem to have realized in any great numbers that the poor and obscure are just as valuable an asset as the rich and famous, if not more so.

The Brujah are, as a clan, the Kindred most likely to treat the kine as — well, I'd be lying if I said equals, but at least as aware beings. As people. And they've figured out, too, that the organizations involving the downtrodden, the social groups, the rat-hole bars and seedy nightclubs can be exploited as effectively as the private theater seats and thousand-dollar-an-hour hotel ballrooms.

Our sewer-dwelling Nosferatu are right behind the Brujah in this field. The Nosferatu know, probably better than anyone, how useful it is to be overlooked, and how to take advantage of the "invisible" people. The fact that the Sewer Rats sort of have to rely on the down-and-out because there's almost no way in hell they're getting close to the celebrities probably enters into the equation somewhere too.

You want to hear the scary part? The next clan on the list of those who don't disregard the dregs of society out of hand are the Setites. Yeah, that's right; the Serpents are real big about plugging into both ends of modern culture. Doesn't matter what social strata you're dealing with, odds are better than even that they've got something to interest the Followers. If that doesn't worry you, it should.

The Ravnos used to be significantly involved with the city's poor and indigent, too, especially those types that sort of live right there on the razor's edge of the law. Hell, they might still be involved, but truthfully, I haven't seen or even heard too much from these guys lately. I'd probably be concerned if I didn't have enough real problems to deal with.

Oh, yes. And then there's the Sabbat. You think having the Setites involved in this arena is scary? You ain't seen nothin' yet. You see, to me at least, it looks as though the Sabbat is starting to change its tactics just a bit. Oh, they'll still come screaming at you with jaws agape and machetes unsheathed — but they'll plant a few eyes and ears in the mortal population of your city first. Guess getting the shit kicked out of them by Theo and the boys in New York put the fear of God into them, or something, but they seem to have come around to the idea of using mortals, not just sucking them dry. Not to the extent that the Camarilla does, of course, but enough for those of us with an ear to the streets to notice. Remember how I said the Ventrue and Toreador don't tend to consider the common man to be all that worthwhile? That means they've left the back door open for those of us — and those of the Black Hand — who don't mind starting small and working our way up. I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I really hope the Blue Bloods catch on quick, before something really nasty comes of this.

police precinct, since the cops are probably hassling him every time he tries to bum a dollar. The local jabbers (or, if you don't have the timing or the patience to catch them when they're coherent, the neighborhood kids will do) are a veritable font of information if you need to know who's been moving junk through the area, and in what quantities. Your pet construction worker might just mention that there's a hidden sub-basement at the new site he's working on. And certainly the local Nosferatu — and probably the prince as well — might be very interested in your truck driver who happened to spot a pack of freakish-looking thugs holing up in the abandoned Holiday Inn out on Highway 6. If you think of them as nothing else, every contact you've got among the populace is an eye and an ear you can keep to the ground. The most innocuous

people often learn the most important things, if only they knew how to recognize the truth for what it is — or if you can interpret it from them.

Invisibility

One thing that the rich have in common with the middle class is their reaction to the poor and homeless. They ignore them. Sure, they might occasionally deign to throw the bum with the cardboard sign a buck or two, but usually you can expect nothing more than an averted gaze and a quickened pace.

Build yourself some contacts within the city's huddled masses, and you can start taking advantage of this social form of Obfuscate. No one notices the old homeless woman with the shopping cart digging through dumpsters for something edible. What makes you think they'll notice if she's actually looking for

shredded bits of documentation from your rival's law firm? Waiters are useful for this sort of thing, too. They're expected to stay lurking in the background. So what if you can't get close enough to hear what the two pale gentlemen are discussing at that back table at Antonio's? That's what the waiter's really there for. Cab drivers just need 30 seconds on a cellular phone to tell you where they dropped that really gaunt fare. Mail carriers, meter readers and UPS drivers can justify being just about anywhere. Garbagemen — excuse me, sanitation engineers — are some of the most valuable informants you can imagine, if you tell them what to watch for. All the paranoia in the world won't protect your opponent's secrets from someone that he's trained himself not to notice.

Hot Spots

There's a reason why so many of the Kindred frequent clubs and parties and the like. Assuming you have the strength to stay in control over your baser instincts, there's a whole slew of reasons we like to be where the kine gather in large numbers, and the best way to accomplish that is to own your own establishment. Just about anything will do. Pool hall, dance club, movie theater, coffee house; if you build it, they will — yeah, you know.

Owning a popular hangout is like having your very own society in microcosm. While any given place is probably going to appeal most to a specific segment of the population, you're still likely to get a fairly useful cross-section of kine coming through your doors. Once again, you'll find that all sorts of information can be gleaned from overheard conversations held by the most mundane people, so long as you're able to sift through tons of dross for an ounce of gold. Hell, if your place becomes popular enough, you might just count your fellow Damned, or at least their mortal toys, among your regulars. Make the rounds, circulate, or have your ghouls or employees do the same. If you really want to go whole-hog, you can have the place wired, but that leads to all sorts of sticky legal hassles if it's ever discovered.

This is also a good way to begin developing contacts and working up to your own herd. If you find the same group of people coming in week after week, you're one step there already. By now you should have learned enough about them, either through eavesdropping or direct conversation, to begin developing some fairly good ideas about them. What do they want? How do they operate? What makes them tick? And, most importantly, how can this specific individual best be made to serve your needs?

Sure, you can accomplish the same thing by frequenting the popular hot spots night after night and trying to find the most promising options. When you've

POPULARITY CONTESTS

So how is a Storyteller to decide if a bar, club or any other such endeavor becomes popular? Intelligence + Finance or Law is a great way to determine if the character has the know-how to get the thing started, but the world is full of well-planned hangouts that folded before their first year was up.

Some Storytellers may prefer to simply decide if the new establishment is a hot spot or a dud based on which one best fits in with the story. That's fine. Others, though, may prefer to let luck — and the acumen of the character — play a hand.

For them, we recommend the following system. It's drastically simplified from real life, of course, but it mimics the vagaries of random chance and character knowledge well enough to serve.

For every month in which the business operates, have the player roll his character's Charisma + Streetwise or Expression, if the establishment in question is of a quiet, higher-class variety that advertises through printed media and television rather than through word-of-mouth and the like. Standard difficulty for this roll is 8 (capturing the attention of the jaded public is tough), though the Storyteller might raise or lower it for special circumstances on a month-by-month basis: good word of mouth from a local celebrity, for instance, or a bad review in the city's paper. For every full year of operation in which the establishment shows a net gain, reduce the difficulty of the roll permanently by one (to a minimum of 6). Thus, if the business shows a profit, the difficulty is 8 for the first year, 7 for the second, and 6 all subsequent years.

One success on this roll indicates that the place has broken even for the month. Successes above and beyond the first indicate that the establishment has turned a profit. A failure indicates a loss, and a botch indicates some catastrophic failure (theft, IRS audit, fire or anything else a devious Storyteller wants to throw out). Profits, that is, successes above the first in a given month, are accumulated. A month of breaking even does not alter the numbers at all. A month of loss reduces the accumulated successes by one. A botch reduces accumulated successes by 2 + the number of botches (1s) rolled, in addition to whatever other difficulties it may cause. Should the business ever suffer a loss that reduces the accumulated successes to less than zero, the business has gone under.

got your own place, though, the candidates come to you, and that leaves you a lot more time to pursue other agendas.

As icing on the cake, there's a certain amount of status to be gained among the Kindred community by opening up a successful hangout. If you find you've got at least one or two fellow Licks coming through the doors on a regular basis, you can expect that your name's on the lips of at least a handful of others. This may or may not be a good thing, depending on what it is you're after, but if you've provided one of the Kindred with a few enjoyable evenings, she's at least a little more likely to hear you out when it's finally time to start talking shop.

Word to the wise: Don't make a habit of actually feeding at your club, bar, restaurant or whatever. Even if you've established a real herd among your patrons, take them elsewhere to do the deed. We're coming back to that whole self-control thing again. You'll lose it eventually; none of the young neonates think it'll happen to them, until it does. One bloody — or bloodless — corpse can kill your business faster than a botulism scare. Not to mention what it'll do to the Masquerade if you happen to tear ass through the main room in a blood frenzy.

Once you've got a popular establishment well and truly going, you want to be real careful not to hack off the wrong people. One revoked license or condemnation by the Board of Health can destroy everything you've worked for — to say nothing of a single well-placed firebomb. You can hide; your nightclub can't. For all the good a place like this can do you, don't forget that it can be quickly turned into one big, immobile target, and plan accordingly.

BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A BOON?

Perhaps the best thing about dredging low society for your contacts is that, while it's difficult acquiring any real influence over a large number of them at once, reeling in any one of them is relatively easy. Damn near every member of society's lowest echelon has something he really wants, and it's possible that you can provide it for him.

The homeless have the twin advantages of being some of the most unobtrusive people and the easiest to hook. Start throwing a few bucks at that guy with the sign or the woman with the cart — and I mean a *few* bucks. A burger and a Coke every couple of nights can buy you almost as much loyalty as the blood bond itself.

The junkies and crackheads are just as easy, if you've got just a bit more in the way of funding. These people are suspicious as all hell, and they're going to start asking questions when you first start supplying their regular fix in exchange for favors instead of cash.

Once you've established a working relationship, once you've convinced them that you're not a cop or otherwise looking to screw them, once they know that you really do just want their occasional "help," they'll be killing each other (maybe literally) in a frenzied attempt to please you. Not that speed freaks and crack fiends make the most reliable agents, but I'm sure you can find some use for them, even if it's nothing more than a spot of violence.

Actually, money goes a long way with most of low society, simply because they don't, by definition, have all that much of it. Not everyone is greedy, money-hungry immoral slob just waiting to do favors for a four-digit handout, but you'd be surprised at how many of them are. And a lot of people who'd rather not take "dirty money" find themselves in positions where they have no choice. When Mama's lost her health insurance and Johnny needs his appendix removed, Mama tends to become a lot more reasonable. Desperation isn't quite as reliable as greed, but it works.

STRENGTH OF WILL

It's a running joke that you never hear about poor people jumping from window ledges. While that's partially because a rich and famous person makes a more newsworthy splat, it's true that those dwelling below the poverty line actually have a lower suicide rate. This is because the very few advantages that many of the lower class have over the rich and powerful include mental and emotional fortitude. Those who've had to struggle their entire lives are simply better equipped to deal with hardship. They may not always be paragons of mental health, but at least they're sticking with it.

This is not meant as a blanket statement. It's a tendency only, not a hard-and-fast rule. Many of those in power claw their way to the top through sheer force of will, and many of those at the bottom don't have the drive to hoist themselves up. But in general, particularly when dealing with those who were born into wealth and have had everything spoon-fed to them from day one, it's true more often than not.

This means that the poor can be surprisingly hard to suborn if you find yourself forced to coerce or otherwise strong-arm their cooperation — but it also means that once you've attained the loyalty of such a person, she'll likely prove more faithful and more actively useful in her own area of expertise than will the guy in the Porsche. Combined with the fact that many Kindred are going to dismiss your more modest allies out of hand, they become an even more attractive option.

When you do have to deal with those who are burdened with ethics — maybe you need to make a deal with that scrupulously honest bartender, or you know that devoutly Christian mother of four is the mortal granddaughter of one of the local Malkavians — you really have only two options. One is coercion. This can be anything from physical threats and blackmail if they happen to have any sufficiently juicy secrets to the old “look into my eyes” routine. While this may solve the immediate problem, though, it doesn’t really make for long-term contacts. If you’re having difficulty gaining the loyalty or cooperation of a prospective lackey, you’re probably better served by finding someone else if at all possible. There are so many of these people to pick from that very few specific individuals are worth more than a slight inconvenience.

CHAIN OF COMMAND

Given the difficulty of getting through the doors of high society and the often abstract nature of the favors exchanged, the personal touch is most frequently necessary in the halls of power. The back alleys of downtown and the backyards of low-income housing, however, are a different matter entirely. Services are more frequently exchanged for tangible goods — the transient described above wants his sandwich now, not your promise of sandwiches to come, and he probably doesn’t care who hands it to him. The junkie is more than thrilled to get his fix from whoever has the product, and the club is just as popular — and just as informative — regardless of whose name is on the lease.

Not only is it feasible to operate through ghouls and proxies at this level, it’s highly recommended. To begin with, because authority within the lower class is so diffuse, you’re going to need a lot of these people working with you, and you’re not going to have time to deal with them all personally. Also, consider that those in power — and I refer both to the Kindred and to the kine who hold positions of authority — don’t like the idea of anyone using the little people against them. They’re made uncomfortable by the people they’ve stepped over on their way to the top, and they know full well that they’re outnumbered. You’re going to lose agents and contacts at street level. Accept that, plan for it and move on.

Without the same concerns as the upper class — position, reputation, status — there’s nothing except

YOUR GHOUL FRIDAY

You’ll have noticed by now that much of what I’ve suggested assumes that you’ve got at least one ghoul — and possibly more — laboring on your behalf. This may or may not be the case, but if you haven’t already got such an instrument, you’ll almost certainly want to start hunting for appropriate candidates. It’s obviously possible for the average Kindred to squeak by without such a gofer working for her, and even to thrive in most political environments. If you’re really determined to make your mark in the social strata of kine society, though, you’ll find a loyal ghoul an invaluable, perhaps even essential, tool. Those of you involved in high society will need someone to handle many of the little details and daytime tasks of managing a financial portfolio and social schedule. Not to mention the fact that the people around you will expect you to have servants and employees, and we must keep up appearances, mustn’t we? If you’re more interested in dealing with people at the lower end of the scale, you’ll want a proxy to work through, someone who can do the legwork of contacting your people and can protect you from identification by your rivals.

If you really feel the urge, you can try to go it alone; but in this particular arena, I wouldn’t give a pint of cold rat’s blood for your chances.

what little loyalty you’ve managed to engender to keep your people silent in the face of your enemies. A hefty bribe, being slowly peeled with a cheese-grater, even a simple and unsophisticated application of Dominate or whatever hellish tricks you command are all enough to betray your involvement if a rival gets his hands on your contacts. There are near-infinite ways they can be compelled to reveal what they know about you — which is why it’s best that they know nothing at all.

Work through ghouls or other servants when dealing with low society. Stay in the shadows, except when you must emerge to feed. Unless you make a habit of inflicting a blood bond upon everyone you work with — a tactic that usually presents far more difficulties than it resolves — there’s simply no advantage to be gained by direct exposure.



CHAPTER THREE: ON MATTERS OF GOVERNANCE

Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one.

— Thomas Paine, "Common Sense"

Quick, name something that the government doesn't have its fingers in.

Businesses are neck deep in regulation, kickbacks, tax codes, bureaucrats and lobbyists. A business that doesn't have to deal with the government is one that has already paid its dues and then some.

Political office is a free pass to some of the most exclusive social circles. Membership on the city council equals membership in the most exclusive country clubs. Even if they don't think of you as an equal, at they very least they want to keep an eye on you.

Do you think that criminals exist outside of the government's influence? Watch what happens the next time some punk guns down a cop, and you'll see that even criminals know there's a line between acceptable and unacceptable activity, and it's the politicians and the cops they hire who draw that line. At the time of this book's writing, one of the top American headlines is the executive pardon of a suspected racketeer and tax evader who also happened to be an important Democratic contributor.

Government sets the stage for every sort of activity that takes place within society. Sure, the flow

works in both directions, as society often forces the government to change as social norms evolve. The civil rights movement started at the foundation of society and worked its way up. The powers that be sure as hell weren't going to suddenly legislate equal rights into existence unless they had to. But those are the exceptions, and even in the wake of such a widespread reform, many of the same people who held office in the past simply toned down their rhetoric to keep the press at bay, bit the bullet and remained in office. Government will always be with us, and it will always have a say in everything. Government takes care of all the heavy lifting that no one else wants to handle: building roads, air-traffic control, garbage collection. Yet, without any of those services, society would screech to a halt. The frumpy bureaucrat with the bad breath and potbelly might not be the most glamorous kine to associate with compared to Billboard's darling of the moment. Then again, if he's responsible for shredding all those documents that the mayor doesn't want falling into the hands of the press, he's worth an entire decade of flashes in the pan.

WHY GOVERNMENT?

The consistent and enduring nature of government is one of its most attractive characteristics. Bankruptcy and poor planning can doom a business while a single dud album can send an entertainer to a future of royalties from one-hit wonder compilations. Rarely does an individual hold tremendous sway over a government — which is more than doubly true in the modern nights. Party machines pick and choose candidates that can give their murky agendas an appealing face. Therefore, Kindred don't have to put all their eggs in one basket. A single politician is only useful if he can pull off a victory on Election Day. Of course, he first has to earn a party's nomination and raise enough money to carry out an effective campaign. All that effort goes to waste if he makes a single gaffe, like letting slip what he really thinks about a given minority in front of a live microphone.

Political parties are much more durable. A single candidate might screw up, but his party simply needs to cut ties to him and move along, business as usual. Enduring political parties are tremendously hard to displace, but rather easy to appease. American Democrats and Republicans aren't going anywhere, and they are more than happy to accept your donations. Why back a candidate who won't be around in a century when you can do business with a political institution that has been around for more than half the nation's history?

In most modern democratic systems, the road to office is paved with compromises, promises, favors and debts. Once the votes are counted, the winner can expect his acquaintances and allies to queue up, ready to cash in the favors that their donations and support bought them. As far as most politicians can see, no difference exists between the historical society that wants to preserve a city block from development because of its cultural significance and a Kindred who wants the same thing because his haven is located there. So long as you don't want anything outrageously illegal or something that could spell political suicide, a politician or a party boss isn't likely to find it strange that you've come around to request a favor in light of all those campaign contributions you've made in the past. Politics is not a game in which exposure is a serious risk, particularly because the kine in the system are involved in their own sort of Masquerade in dealing with the press. Mortals find nothing suspicious about Mr. Wiggins calling on the local Republicans in office to hire more police officers to deal with the rise of street crime. The politicians just see a concerned donor making a policy suggestion, no different than the multitude of other corporate and private donors who bankrolled the last round of campaigns. They don't know that the rather eccentric but wealthy Mr. Wiggins wants more police on the beat to put the clampdown on his rabble-rousing, drug-running Brujah rival — and they don't care to ask.



Politics also attracts the sort of person who is open to peddling favors. While some politicians enter public life with a highly idealistic agenda, their hopes are often crushed in the face of political compromises, entrenched politicians who have already cashed in their morals and the endless drive to raise enough lucre for the next election cycle. Few politicians turn away donations. Some might check into a patron's background, especially if they're dealing with a relatively unknown person who appears on the scene and begins distributing massive campaign donations. Even then, such "consideration" comes only in an effort to stave off a brewing controversy. It's important to stay subtle. Don't draw a lot of attention to yourself until you already have a few people out there who owe you for those small but regular donations. It is worth remembering that politicians expect donations to come with strings attached, and if they had any moral problems with this fact they would've burned out long before taking office.

Politicians also make reliable allies. Most politicians spend their terms of office planning for their next campaign. Every vote must be cast with both the voters and the party line in mind. Political office is only useful if you can hold on to it, a truth that lingers over everyone from a member of a rural school board to a five-term senator. A Kindred who proves to be a reliable campaign donor can count on aid when he needs it, so long as he doesn't demand anything too difficult to provide. You're not likely to convince the city council to cut back on police funding while a gang war is in full swing because doing so will likely piss off the rank-and-file voters. On the other hand, if you can carefully balance your own needs against the latest poll numbers, your demands will reach much more receptive ears. The key is that once a local party structure grows to depend on your donations and assistance, the less likely it is to suddenly veer in a direction that runs against your best interests. Political parties favor potential candidates who are both stable and reliable — such people are likely to tow the party's line once they accept it.

By extension, politicians rarely undergo sudden changes of heart and make dependable allies for Kindred. Even when they do have such swerves in disposition, the clever Kindred realizes that such a turn indicates another voice among the throng and can alert himself to potential enemies before they show their faces. Chicago's history is murky with Kindred playing mortal politics and would doubtless remain so tonight if the Lupines hadn't strewn Kindred guts about the place.

The final appealing characteristic of dealing with government is that it is somewhat easy to create a layer of insulation between you and the political process. Since politically oriented citizens' groups, corporations and lobbyists rather than individuals make most campaign donations, it is relatively simple for a Kindred to

create front groups with which to cover her tracks. A savvy businesswoman can direct her company to donate money on her behalf, while an independently wealthy Kindred might create a special-interest group, complete with lobbyists and public-relations specialists on staff, to help push his agenda with the state assembly.

Campaign finance is an accepted part of the American political process. It isn't always newsworthy, but that added degree of protection is worth the bother when your candidate or party of choice collapses beneath a scandal. More importantly, though, it helps to keep rival Kindred off balance by covering your tracks. If your opponents don't know you're involved in politics, they can't react to your moves, undermine your position or otherwise effectively deal with you.

Let's say that a prince wants to teach the sewer-dwelling Nosferatu insurgent a lesson for copping an attitude toward him in front of the neonates. The prince might want to push an initiative through the city council that would allocate funds for extensive maintenance work in the sewers, disrupting his haven and forcing him to find another one. If the Nosferatu openly employed lobbyists to disrupt the prince's plan, he's only going to piss him off even more. But if the Society for the Preservation of Our Heritage, in which our Sewer Rat happens to have a contact, thinks the sewers are an important example of colonial-era masonry and helps block the initiative, the prince might simply attribute his failure to the vagaries of mortal politics rather than to the reeking Nosferatu. This result leaves our Nosferatu with both his haven intact and the prince still only moderately angry, rather than tremendously pissed. Of course, the prince can always dig deeper into the society, but at least the Sewer Rat has more time to plan his next move.

WHO TO TARGET

While politicians draft and approve policy, they aren't the ones who carry it out. Career bureaucrats, cops who walk a city beat and the union workers driving the garbage trucks are just as useful, probably even more so in many cases, as a mayor or state representative. Each type of government worker and career politician has her own uses and drawbacks.

Cops

The police are obviously useful. Even the most law-abiding Kindred engage in a fundamentally illegal activity, assault and sometimes murder, on a regular basis. Sooner or later, having a contact down at the local precinct comes in handy. Cops generally make a decent but not spectacular wage, making them somewhat prone to bribery. Protection payments are an effective way to keep the cops clear of your favorite haunts while possibly buying a reliable source of dirt on department plans and procedures.

But some cops approach the job with a sense of honor that makes them immune to bribery. With these cops, a Kindred's best bet is to make himself useful enough that the cops aren't going to bother him for minor offenses or even major ones committed against victims that aren't likely to generate headlines.

The easiest way to stay on a cop's good side is to feed him reliable information that leads to arrests. Sure, playing stool pigeon might not win your friends with the local gangbangers and pushers. But if you're careful and finger only smalltime operators and people without the allies to pose a threat to you, the cops are likely to look the other way when your brawl with some anarchy loudmouth leaves a few bystanders hurt.

One of the most important things to remember about the police is that if a cop is injured or killed in the line of duty, all bets are off. The police hate nothing more than a cop killer. If some maniac does off a cop, you can turn him into a "Get Out of Jail Free" card by steering the boys in blue in his direction. Just don't overdo the hero act. The last thing you want is media coverage, and if you prove too useful to cops, you might find them endlessly shaking you down for tips.

Finally, it pays to hold some information back. Knowing where Fat Tony dumps his corpses is handy, but don't just blurt it out at the next opportunity. Wait until you want to make a move on a rival's haven, then trade that info for an agreement to disregard any noise complaints from the neighborhood.

UNIONS

Many public workers are unionized. Unions are somewhat fickle, as they theoretically answer directly to the rank-and-file members, but it does help to keep in contact with a union's upper ranks. The union can't directly modify policy, and it isn't likely to pressure law-abiding members into anything illegal, but the union provides a lot of information on city employees and allows access to low-ranking workers. The union can ensure that the luggage-claim warehouse watchman happens to be a half-blind old coot pushing retirement the night you want to break in and poke around. If the new highway exit ramp threatens to put a major thoroughfare right outside the front door of your haven, a few dollars in the right hands can push the union to call for an intensive study into the city's safety standards or a new round of zoning negotiations. The delay gives you some time to work out a contingency plan.

Union officials often work directly for the union for reasonable but not extravagant salaries. Many are also elected to their positions. These two factors mean that while bribery is an effective tool, it must be balanced against the interests of the union membership.

See Chapter One for more information on unions.

INDIVIDUAL CITY WORKERS

While establishing a good relationship with a union grants you access to the city's workings, a union can sometimes be a slow and unwieldy tool. If you can cultivate a relationship with a particular garbage collector, receptionist or subway conductor for a bribe, you can raise a lot of hell with your rivals or spare yourself a lot of grief with the police. A few dollars in the right place can ensure that the downtown subway train your enemy must take to an important meeting develops engine trouble and spends 20 minutes stuck in the tunnel between stations. A few more dollars can buy you a misfiled search warrant that leads a squad of SWAT officers straight to a bitter enemy's haven. Low-level workers are usually quite open to bribes, but sometimes the more career-minded ones may balk at accepting money or participating in your schemes for fear of hurting their chances at future promotions.

Sometimes, it helps to have a few mid-level managers on your side. As with career bureaucrats, many of the city's workers quickly reach the top of their promotion ladder. These workers are somewhat more open to bribes, and also can entice lower-ranking workers to help you out in return for future promotions. With a little luck, you can build a pyramid of favors, buying off the manager of the local subway station. Using that influence, you can ensure that future promotions go to people likely to find both your bribes and your occasional requests agreeable.

CAREER BUREAUCRATS

One of the easiest groups among which to establish contacts, career bureaucrats are often underpaid (in their eyes) and underworked (in everyone else's). Most of them occupy mid-level management and administrative positions. While the upper levels of government come and go with elections, these jobs are too numerous and not glamorous enough to attract political flunkies and appointees. Nobody pads the governor's campaign fund in order to score a job at the local DMV. Maybe Delores the receptionist likes you enough to keep you informed about who has been in to see the mayor lately, and she's likely to stick around as a useful contact for the next few administrations. This also leaves many bureaucrats facing a cap on their potential career path. All of the really good jobs require political connections.

Back scratching is extremely effective with these people. Most of them feel little loyalty to any given administration, and so long as they aren't asked to do anything that could risk their jobs, they are very willing to please. The computer tech down at city hall has virtually unlimited access to the office machines. The woman in the copy room can easily run off an extra copy of a memo and erase the activity from any logs. Even relatively innocent information can be tremendously

useful. Something as simple as knowing the DA's favorite wine can come in handy — come Christmastime, you know exactly what to send him. Sure, it may sound inconsequential, but that's exactly the kind of gesture that can push you to someone's good side.

AIDES AND ADVISORS

No elected official operates in a vacuum. Particularly when dealing with highly technical or esoteric issues, most politicians rely on trusted specialists to advise them on policy. These advisors are often tucked away out of the public eye, receiving little press but standing in a position to play a large role in sculpting a politician's decisions. These can be anything from third-party market researchers to urban planners to traffic solutions developers — anything outside the realm of making sure the project is done (such as planning the project and physically implementing the project) falls into the hands of consultants.

An advisor makes an excellent contact because he leaves you one step removed from the actual decision-maker. He also stands at least some chance of surviving any election defeats. Advisors are often close friends or allies of a given politician, but some work more along party lines than personal ones. If you've already cracked the city's computer network, the mayor's trusted technology advisor might be convinced that city computer security is in no need of an upgrade. Many advisors aren't approachable for favors, as some of them are selected for loyalty first and competence second. On the other hand, this might leave an advisor ill equipped to make a decision. Exploit this shortcoming by feeding an advisor biased reports, incorrect information or data that pushes her in the direction you want the city moving.

APPOINTED OFFICIALS

Appointed officials, particularly judges if they aren't selected by popular vote in your area, are extremely useful contacts. Judges have tremendous flexibility in cutting back the capability of other branches of government, particularly law enforcement. If the police arrest an important mortal agent of yours, a "sympathetic" judge can more than likely spring him on a technicality. Every judge carries his biases into the courtroom, and one biased toward your interests is a very powerful person indeed.

Other appointed officials, such as cabinet members or agency heads, are equally useful. Many of these politicians have strong working relationships with other, more powerful politicians, making them excellent access points to the highest levels of government. Appointed officials tend to have a lot of latitude in directing policy and implementing the mundane administration of the city. They are often chosen for their political reliability, but once in office have a wide berth

to pursue their jobs. So long as they do nothing to embarrass the current administration, they have little outside influence to worry about.

Appointed officials who are given lifelong terms, such as judges in some areas, are invaluable. A Kindred need not worry about wasting time and effort on someone who is going to lose office in a few years, making any money and effort spent to win over someone in a lifelong position a much more efficient use of resources. Much like politicians, appointed officials must often carefully tend to their reputations. Bribes might not be as effective against them, but any leverage you can give them to pursue a higher office is money in the bank for winning over appointees.

POLITICAL FAMILIES

Many cities have a few families that establish a tradition of public service. While somewhat rare and often wealthy enough to prove difficult to sway, such a household can prove extremely fruitful if one can establish a long-term relationship with it. Such a family probably has sons and daughters involved at all levels of government, and almost certainly extends ties to the business, academic and social worlds. A trusted business partner might become a valuable political advisor. By aligning your interests with those of the family, you ensure that someone with the right connections is on your side.

The problem in dealing with a family is that they aren't likely to strike up a social relationship with, say, a corporation or other front. You'll probably have to personally establish a relationship with family members. Young ones are usually the most approachable, especially if they regularly make the rounds at clubs or social events. You might run into some suspicion about your peculiar habits, and a long-term relationship is probably impossible without some heavy-duty explanations. Still, it never hurts to be on good terms with an upstanding family that could very well produce a future president.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties take money, ask few questions and are always willing to hear from their reliable and generous benefactors. As was described above, political parties are stable landmarks in the political landscape. Individuals come and go, but the party machine continues to roll. As most politicians are under heavy pressure to support the party in order to maintain economic and political success for it, maintaining good relations with the powers that be in the party leadership gives you indirect access to every politician who claims party membership. Councilman Lambert might not know you from a hole in the wall, but you can bet that he knows the local Republican leadership. They're the ones who helped shut up his opponent at the primary and rallied the party around him. If they let him know

that buying up and bulldozing that block of abandoned buildings is a bad idea, he's going to listen. Party leadership doesn't need bribes in the classic sense. Campaign contributions, preferably large and regular ones, are all that you need to win their attention. Money equals votes in democracies and republics, and votes equal political office.

ACTIVISTS

Politicians who run on populist platforms can be somewhat troublesome, as they often buck the party line and care more for serving a certain vocal segment of the population such as a minority community or a special-interest group. While they are just as eager to accept campaign donations as anyone else, they are much less likely to violate their principles in the interest of keeping the money coming. To these people, those principles and their home community are what pushed them to office. While they might not be too useful for their political connections, their reputation in the community makes them very useful when dealing directly with society. Since they often enjoy strong popular support and command respect on the streets, they are much more useful for informally dealing with the community. Want to bring the heat down on a rival's business? Leak information of environmental abuses or racist hiring practices to your activist politician friend; watch the protest marches and picket lines cripple your rival and garner him piles of bad press.

Every activist is at heart a fanatic. Most of them aren't dense enough to simply accept a tip from a complete stranger, but you can use their fanaticism to incite them against your enemies. While they are difficult to employ as direct weapons, activists are useful for striking at a rival's assets, business partners and political allies.

Political advocacy groups, such as the NAACP or NRA, are also important channels for both money and influence. Most of these groups are firmly planted in one political party's camp, yet they are independent enough to at least pose a threat to break an alliance and withdraw their support should their allied party fail to advance their agenda. An advocacy group is just as open to donations as any politician, and many of them are even more willing to help put in a word of support for a particular bill if it means more donations for the cause.

However, these groups tend to be very focused on a single objective and rapidly lose effectiveness and enthusiasm for issues that aren't connected to their goals. The local NRA, for example, might not be enthusiastic about jumping into the struggle over planning out a new subway line. Also, many of these organizations are administered on a national level and tend to view issues on that level. Chances are that any activity and fundraising efforts are coordinated by a central body

that has little clout in local politics outside the threat of lawsuits and grassroots protests.

Despite these drawbacks, such groups are still very useful. Regular donations might convince the NAACP to involve itself with local charges of unethical hiring practices that might otherwise have fallen below its radar, while the repeal of state concealed-carry laws could draw the attention of the NRA.

THE CURRENCY OF THE POLITICAL REALM

At all levels, politics are built on alliances, favors and compromise. Parties formed because it is much easier to work as a coordinated group to advance a political agenda. Individual members rarely embrace every aspect of a party's agenda, but the alternative is political isolation and the subsequent inability to advance, well, anything. Most politicians are quite used to turning a blind eye to somewhat questionable activity if what they stand to gain outweighs the risk of discovery. Anything that can advance a politician's career is fair game as enticement to work with you.

At lower levels of government, bribes tend to work much better than favors. Most bureaucrats or city employees are blue-collar workers with little opportunity for advancement. City workers can often be harder to seduce with bribes than politicians. Many people involved in politics have a college education, law degree and personal wealth or business connections to fall back on if their terms of office should implode due to scandal. A sanitation technician convicted of accepting bribes doesn't have many career options outside of the local fast food joint.

DONATIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND OTHER BRIBES

Money makes the world go 'round, and the world of politics is positively spinning. An inconceivable amount of politics is dictated by money. Candidates win or lose elections often on the strength of their fundraising efforts. More money means more ads, more exposure to the public eye and more votes. The wonderful thing about politics is that campaign donations are largely a completely legal method of bribery.

Unfortunately, donations must all be accounted for and are a matter of public record. However, it does not take much effort to establish an organization that can front for your activity. A surprising number of small, grassroots activist organizations are little more than false blinds through which cash flows from the Kindred to the pockets of local politicians. The Committee for Local Business may spring up to fund the fight against a national chain of department stores that wants to buy up several blocks of decrepit storefronts. What looks like a bidding war to win support in the city council



between a major corporation and a few small business owners might hide an intense struggle between a Brujah desperate to hold on to his favored feeding grounds and a powerful Ventrue new to the area and eager to hamstring potential rivals.

Many Kindred active in the business world simply donate money through their businesses. This strategy has the added bonus of leveraging favors for both the Kindred and his business holdings as well as providing tax exemption for those business façades. Furthermore, business provides an excellent cover for deflecting suspicion over any agendas that a Kindred ties to his donations.

Money doesn't have to flow directly between a Kindred and a politician or party. Politicians do not exist in a vacuum. They have their own priority projects, and a smart Kindred recognizes a politician's goals and works to fulfill them in a way that leaves the politician in her debt. The mayor might be a patron of the arts but lacks the political muscle needed to earmark funds to renovate a once popular art gallery in a city that has fallen on hard times. An anonymous donation to the gallery doesn't directly benefit the mayor, but it does place the donor in his good graces while also avoiding any messy paper trails or other entanglements. Know your enemy, but also know your potential ally.

A politician who relies on a special-interest group for support opens up another avenue to trade cash for influence. With enough sizable donations or even just some convincing arguments, it's possible to cut the ties between an advocacy group and a politician. Rather than offer a politician the tools to stay in office, this move threatens to deny him important resources. A district attorney who regularly relies on fundamental religious groups to carry his party's nomination might find those compromises he made with a liberal governor coming back to haunt him when a challenger positioned even further to the right emerges. The challenge is doubly threatening if advocacy groups that regularly lined up to support the incumbent want a more conservative candidate on the ballot. In this case, money can serve to indirectly drive an unpalatable politician out of office.

When in doubt, or when first entering the political scene, it's best to support young upstarts and challengers rather than established, incumbent politicians. If a pol has been in office for a decade, chances are that he already owes many favors and has cultivated relationships with entrenched power brokers. He already has most of his problems taken care of, and the queue for considerations and debts stretches around the corner. An underdog probably has far fewer supporters. While donations to such a campaign are more likely to turn up nothing in the face of electoral defeat, victory places you in a much better position to request favors and establish a long-term working relationship.

The sometimes volatile nature of politics highlights why it is best to work with groups and parties rather than individuals, but if you want the ear of someone down at city hall, your best bet is to back a rookie candidate if you're not already in the machine.

Bureaucrats are easier to bribe in some ways, more difficult in others. While a bribe lacks the veneer of legality that a campaign donation carries, it yields direct results. Someone who takes a bribe does so knowing full well that he has to provide some service in return. While a contribution is a suggestion, a bribe is a guarantee. As accepting a bribe is an illegal act in and of itself, they are very useful when trying to convince someone to commit a crime. A bureaucrat or politician who is receptive to a bribe is much more likely to commit minor or perhaps even major crimes in return for cash. The problem this strategy presents is that if the target of a bribe comes under investigation, he more than likely will lead investigators to his patron. The best strategy in dealing with bribery is to work through an intermediary or to cover your own tracks by paying in cash, disguising yourself and revealing as little about your background as possible. The target of your bribe doesn't need to know anything about your identity or your agenda unless the situation absolutely dictates otherwise. Even in such a case, perhaps bribery isn't your best course of action.

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

Favors are at least as valuable as cash, and often far more so. In a hotly contested political race, all the TV commercials and radio spots that money can buy are worth less than photos of a candidate cavorting in a hot tub with a few working girls. Rendering an invaluable service to a politician is an important tool for many young Kindred who dabble in politics, as few young vampires have the resources needed to buy access to politicians. A dirt poor, sewer-dwelling Nosferatu capable of digging up someone's skeletons is every bit the equal of a millionaire Toreador perched in a fortified penthouse. There are simply some things that money can't buy — such as taped conversations of the mayor accepting a bribe or a firsthand account of a prostitute who has serviced the area's moral majority leaders.

The pitfall in dealing with favors, as opposed to cash, is that favors are often much less precise in garnering the effect you're after. Money has a very direct, causal relationship in politics. Money equals media time, media time equals votes. Favors are trickier. First, pulling anything illegal is likely to earn you little more than an arrest warrant. Unless you're dealing with someone who is already treading on the wrong side of the law, most politicians and bureaucrats aren't willing to advance their careers at the risk of melting them down with a felony indictment, let alone verdict. Second, favors require a bit more research and effort than

a donation. You need to study your target, understand what course of action is likely to appeal to her and pull it off without drawing attention to your true nature. If drug violence grabs headlines and weakens your candidate's popularity rating, you're much better off gathering information about the offenders and passing it along to your ally rather than personally wading into the street and busting heads. In the former case, you give your ally a chance to soak up some media coverage while making it clear just who exactly provided her with a chance to shine. In the latter case, you've denied your ally a chance to solve the problem on her own terms while undercutting your own ability to establish a clear causal relationship between the benefit (a decrease in crime) and the source (you).

Favors take two basic forms: those that provide a positive benefit to your target, and those that damage your target's enemies. The former is the best one to work with, though it is the hardest to implement. It is much easier to damage someone's political career than it is to uncover what you can do to advance it in a way that lands him in your debt. Furthermore, politicians aren't likely to explicitly trust a relative stranger who uses underhanded tactics against their rivals, even if it does them some good. Someone willing to break the law, though useful, is best kept at arm's length until he can show that he is smart enough to cover up his tracks, or at least cover up any tracks that lead back to anyone above him. Your first move in winning the favor of a Republican state representative shouldn't be unleashing a horde of rats at a Democrat fundraising dinner. Sure, you've just crippled the Democrat's ability to raise campaign funds and compete with the Republicans, but you are likely to be viewed as a dangerous loose cannon unless the person you want to work with specifically asked you take that course of action.

Drastic, sudden actions that upset the local balance of power are not a good way to open up a relationship. The Republican state rep doesn't see an eager ally. Instead, he sees a possibly unbalanced troublemaker who happened to prove himself useful. Furthermore, the Republican can't afford to associate with you. For all he knows, you've left a yellow brick road of evidence that leads directly to you and indirectly to him.

The best strategy is to start small and build up from there. If you perform too well, your chosen ally might become all too aware of your capabilities and seek to deliberately avoid coming into your debt for fear of relying too much on one particular person. Politicians are very much aware of the favors they owe, and they are careful to never give any one particular person too much sway over their political careers. Don't turn to anyone too often too early in your relationship or you risk scaring him off. Start small. Buy a ticket to a

fundraiser, chat it up with your would-be fellows and leave a noticeable but not too large donation. Donate more money or time over the course of your relationship's growth and begin to work on the personal aspect built on the exchange of favors.

THE BRUTE FORCE METHOD

Sometimes, the direct method is the best method. The physical superiority of the Kindred over mortals makes intimidation an easy way to gain temporary power over someone. Intimidation and threats work best in the short term, unless you hold some serious dirt over someone. Extortion is a much better bet for establishing a long-term relationship with a politician, especially given that so much of politics concentrates on winning the next election.

But even extortion has its limits. A politician can always choose to simply retire from public service. Therefore, the best extortion schemes revolve around evidence of illegal activity, rather than simply embarrassing information, that can land a politician in jail even after he leaves office. In contrast to extending favors, bribes or donations, extortion and intimidation schemes are easy to put into motion. If you need to sway a politician's opinion quickly and decisively, intimidation is the way to go.

Physically intimidating someone is rather easy for the Kindred. A simple demonstration of the Damned's

physical superiority is a good way to start. Showing off a supernatural skill is somewhat risky but can be tremendously useful. After all, just who can the city counselor turn to about the "fanged monster" who appeared in his bedroom and threatened to tear his head off? Turning to the police is political suicide, because if word leaks to the press that Counselor Cray is afraid of the bogeyman, his political career is over.

In fact, the more that a Kindred can draw upon his superhuman abilities, the better off he is in intimidating someone. If Cray complains to the police about a crazed intruder, the cops investigate, and Cray possibly picks up some support from the public in sympathy. If the police investigation turns up absolutely zero physical evidence of an intrusion, Cray looks somewhat bad and ends up stuck between a rock and a hard place, and hopefully ready to listen to your suggestions.

The biggest risk of such tactics involves media coverage and the attention that such activity can draw to you. Witch-hunters, rival Kindred and other meddlers may begin their own investigations into your activity if any evidence of supernatural involvement filters out to the press. While obviously Cray wants no hint of the weird to hit the media and leave her looking like a loon, anyone with contacts with the police or even with Cray might hear the whole story and poke his nose into it.



Intimidation must be backed up with proof that your dead self is capable of pulling off something nasty. The best way to do this is to offer evidence that you are capable of entering your target's home, office or other secure location undetected. Steal his favorite pen off his desk without setting off the alarm system at city hall and hand it to him while making your demands. Provide a detailed description of his wife's nightly activities or what his children were up to at that slumber party last week. If he calls in the cops, back off until the heat subsides (especially if you've managed to avoid leaving any evidence of your intrusion behind), then return and make him squirm. At this point, if he alerts the police again, he risks looking like a paranoid lunatic.

Blackmail is much more effective than the threat of physical violence but somewhat more difficult to put into motion. Extortion takes more time than intimidation, as you must first accumulate embarrassing material or evidence of illegal activity before you can approach your subject. The first stumbling block to an extortion scheme is that your subject has to be involved in something worth extorting. If you're dealing with an absolutely upright citizen, you may not have a chance to uncover any sordid secrets. If you do dig up any dirt on someone with a carefully tended image as a morally upright person, it has the potential to alienate his supporters in mass numbers. On the other hand, a politician who is known for lechery and drunken excess is somewhat immune to scandal — his constituency might even expect it of him. The public has already seen his warts, and he's not likely to lose any support unless you can find evidence of something really heinous. A politician whose checkered past is public knowledge can also admit the sordid details and hope for the best, counting on his established reputation to carry him through.

The timing of any extortion scheme is a critical component to its success. The public tends to have a very short memory for politics. Come election time, a three-year-old scandal generates little press and barely influences the polls. However, a scandal that breaks during the election stirs up much more trouble and attention. The press can latch on to the story and make it a critical issue in the race, while both sides either press the scandal as an issue or work desperately to diffuse the negative attention. Should a scandal break late in the election, chances are that it won't have enough time to dominate the headlines and draw voter attention to have as large an impact on the final vote tally. Politicians are acutely aware of how scandals play out during an election, thus it is important to time your move to maximize your returns.

Digging up dirt is largely an exercise in research. Almost everyone, no matter how powerful or obscure, has something embarrassing buried in his past. Shadow

your target for a time, taking note of his business associates and social contacts. This step alone can turn up some juicy bits, especially if your target is engaged in an extramarital affair or is a regular drug abuser. The next step is to research your target's associates. Should any of them dabble in illegal practices or even have dubious connections, it might be possible to tie your target directly to them or to threaten your target by exposing his proximity to shady characters. Finally, you can trace your target's history, checking up on his college associates and activities. If your target was a coke addict in his privileged past, he just might still be one tonight — though he might be elected president anyway, so be careful.

Should someone that you have targeted with intimidation or blackmail defy you, you must utterly crush his political career. Making threats without backing them up is the best way to quickly lose any credibility you have. Furthermore, future politicians you target are much more likely to cave in if you can provide evidence that others have lost their careers because of your activities. Killing a politician or his family members is a bad idea. The cops swarm all over cases like that and refuse to give up until they've found at least a somewhat plausible suspect. In the US and most other countries, the law enforcement community largely bases the intensity and effort it expends on a case on the brutality and sensational nature of the crime and the wealth and social standing of the victim. A decapitated councilwoman generates a hell of a lot more attention than a stabbed drifter.

Hit politicians where it counts by destroying their reputations and careers. If you hold some damning evidence against a politician, drop it off at every newspaper and television station imaginable. Undermine his fundraising efforts by disrupting his big money dinners and socials. Even a relatively weak neonate has the skills and abilities to penetrate light security and raise some havoc.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

A politician might begin his career by running for the school board. A few campaign donations and a kind word or two at a meet-and-greet fundraiser is probably enough to put you in his mind without drawing too much attention. At this point, your best bet is to watch your candidate at work. If he's incompetent or lacks the charisma to win over the voters, you can cut your losses before making a significant investment of time and money. If he wins and shows promise, groom him for something larger. Lend him financial support for his upcoming campaign and work in the background with your undead capabilities to sabotage his rivals and contain any potential scandals. Establish a simpatico relationship with him and use him to gain access to other politicians while building relationships with the

leaders of his political organization. The critical goal at this step is to squeeze your candidate for as many contacts as possible while spreading your money to the general party fund and other candidates.

While you do not want to distance yourself from your first candidate too much, you do not want him to drag you down or catch any blame for poor decisions should he lose an election. Continue working in this manner and soon you'll have access to politicians at all levels of power. Of course, if you want to maintain a lower profile, it is possible to simply let your wallet do the talking. Even in such a case, it is best to choose an intermediary — either a trusted ally or someone working for a front company or foundation you've established — who can form a personal relationship with politicians and administrators. Remain flexible. Persevere. Some politicians respond eagerly to bribes or offers of less than legal favors, while others will require much more cajoling.

PITFALLS

Politics, while relatively safe as far as physical violence goes, is not without its dangers. The stakes in politics are quite high, and for this reason it is best to tread carefully. While the Kindred enjoy many advantages over humans, they also must deal with some unique disadvantages.

THE MASQUERADE

Exposure and the Masquerade both loom large over any Kindred who dabbles in mortal political games. As soon as you make yourself a player on the political scene, someone will decide to check up on your background. Just as you might dig into a politician's past to expose fodder for blackmail and extortion, expect those you work with and against to do some research of their own. For this reason, it is important to place several layers of separation between you and your targets. Or, you can work in a very roundabout way that leaves you ready to call in a favor without drawing too much attention to yourself until you are ready to deal with the consequences. Mortals, such as the police or party-funded private investigators, might take an interest in tailing you at the behest of someone with whom you've been in contact over the course of your political activity.

At the very least, someone is going to check up on the mysterious and generous donor to at least gain an inkling about why he's making donations. Remember that politicians are quite aware that every sizable campaign donation comes to them with strings implicitly attached. No one likes to operate without knowing what he owes and to whom he owes it.

A wise course while dabbling in politics is to keep your nightly activities as subdued as possible.

Frequenting low-rent bars and clubs is a good way to attract even more attention from investigators. You may want to change your feeding patterns if such venues are your usual hunting grounds. Yes, this means quit feeding from hookers.

In general, it is best to maintain a façade as a respectable citizen, even if you appear in public only at night. If you plan on personally dealing with mortals in power, be prepared to dress and act the part. The respectable citizen act has to become a fulltime mask. A gangbanging Malkavian who chooses to go the political route to keep the cops clear of her stomping grounds has to drop the street act. She can't expect to trade her leather jacket for a cocktail dress only on the nights that she's hobnobbing with the police commissioner and his cronies. Eventually, should she put enough money in the right pockets and pull enough favors for the right people, someone's going to dig into her story. If they find out anything glaringly wrong for an upper-crust socialite, such as that she hangs out in dive bars, dresses like a juvenile delinquent and picks fights with the *cholos* on the weekends, the investigation will only increase in its intensity.

Remember, you're targeting these people because they have power. Once you've gained enough power of your own, someone is eventually going to target you for precisely the same reason. If your true nature becomes known to anyone in power, it might even touch off a witch-hunt. At the very least, you'll find yourself politically ostracized. At the very worst, the prince may decide that you're threatening the Masquerade and call a blood hunt. In that case, it sucks to be you.

NATIONAL VERSUS LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The examples given in this chapter consistently refer to politics and bureaucrats at a local level. National government is so strongly steeped in security, and the players on that level are so far above the average mortal in terms of money, status and importance that someone with as critical a secret as the Kindred has little chance of dealing on that level without exposure. The secret service makes your local police, even an elite SWAT team, look like a half-assed gang of Boy Scouts who don't know one end of a gun from the other. Anyone with access to the president, Senate, House of Representatives or Supreme Court is subject to intensive background checks to screen out any security risks. Your best bet in dealing with government at this level is to support special-interest groups and industry lobbyists. You might find some dirt on these people or sway them over with a few contributions, but direct contact with any politicians involved with the national governments is a staggeringly bad idea. Bureaucrats are a somewhat different case, though any of them with

access to state secrets are subject to background checks and other investigative moves that could leave you exposed. The rule of thumb in dealing with the feds is that unless you absolutely must, don't do it. Even then, it might be best to cut your losses and find some other way to resolve your problems.

I know, I know — this flies in the face of those terrible tales of the Jyhad you've heard. Oligarchus, the Ancient Ventrue, controls the president! Ivan Bloodsky personally engineered the fall of Soviet Russia! Area 51 is overrun with the Damned! All paranoid dementia.

I'm not arguing that it hasn't happened in the past. I know of at least one prince who was a mortal king, and I don't doubt that some of the movers and shakers in the global political arena have contacts with the Kindred. I'm just saying that any Kindred with aspirations for power on that level either knows the value of remaining far, far behind the curtains or she was whacked before she had a chance to expose the rest of us with her ignorant ways. I mean, the fact that the Masquerade exists at all proves that the mortal world doesn't even suspect we're here. If some powerful elder was using his mind boojums to steer the Middle East into war with the United States, don't you think we'd notice?

Don't get me wrong. They're there. You just can't see them, and they're not as powerful as they'd have you believe.

At least, that's what I'm hoping.

OTHER KINDRED

Sooner or later, you're going to run into a fellow Kindred who has also plunged her fangs into mortal politics. Your best bet in this situation is to keep a low profile if this new rival is significantly more powerful than you. In any case, you've now met someone who can likely only be an enemy.

Politics is a zero-sum game. For every winner, there must be a loser. Unless the two of you have very similar or complementary goals, odds are that at some point you or the candidates you turn to for favors will come into direct competition. The most important lesson in dealing with fellow Kindred in this arena is to ferret them out as quickly as possible. That Nosferatu who is lying low and slowly collecting dirt on every promising young pol in the city is much more of a threat than the snotty Toreador who regularly meets with the mayor. While the Toreador may have the ear of someone in power, you can anticipate his moves and plan accordingly. Since you haven't uncovered the Nosferatu, you'll never see her move coming.

HOW TO USE GOVERNMENT

So you've managed to place a few campaign donations in the right hands. Archie down at city hall owes you for helping his son find a good lawyer who kept him

out of jail. The chief of the precinct near your haven still owes you for the tip that led to the arrest of that serial rapist. What now? You have these mortals ready to pay you back for your help, but it's not like you can ask them to storm your rival's haven and torch the place.

The most useful way to use government against other undead rivals is to turn the Masquerade into a weapon. Once a few of your tips have borne fruit, feed the cops stories about a big drug deal that's going down at your rival's haven. Tell them about the drug deals and prostitution that might be taking place at some of his favorite mortal social spots. Your contact at the IRS might be very eager to hear about your rival's business dealings and its unreported, taxable earnings. Government is very useful for sniping at a rival and sapping his strength — which is the method of the Jyhad, after all.

The Masquerade hangs heavy over each and every Kindred. No one would dare kill or otherwise harass a tax agent or cop. Such a move would attract massive amounts of government and media attention, leaving the prince with little choice but to call for a blood hunt to end the threat.

On the other hand, government is very useful for maintaining the Masquerade. When some ill-chosen fledgling goes into wassail and starts raising hell, you may need that contact down at the station to keep things quiet. Let the prince know that you're doing your part to keep things stable, and you may very well be rewarded. When personally dealing with the cops, you're much more likely to talk your way out the situation if someone on the other side knows who you are and knows that you're too valuable to book on an assault charge or something else relatively minor.

Much of the Masquerade relies on personal relationships with the tiny cogs that, if spun the right way, could set into motion much larger wheels that can raise all sorts of trouble for the undead. Prove yourself adept at such "community relations" work and you'll keep your own ass safe while paving the way for your own rise among the Kindred.

Political contacts are also a very handy shield against a rival's plots. If you are troubled by the threat of a personal attack, you can ask the police chief for a little protection because one of the hoods you've sold down the river is gunning for you. The police don't need to know what's really going on, and they'll swallow your story if you've been useful enough. A tax audit or attempt to seize your haven on grounds of eminent domain can become tied up in court or die in some forgotten file cabinet if you know the right people. If you are in contact with enough politicians, you may become too well connected for anyone to target directly. If you go missing and enough mortals notice, the Masquerade

will be threatened, possibly leaving your killer at the mercy of the prince. While that's little comfort if you've been destroyed, it is a useful shield that may discourage hot-blooded nemeses.

THE SABBAT AND MORTAL GOVERNMENT

The Sabbat quite often works to win influence with the governments of the cities within which it is strong. The lower ranks of the Sabbat often lack the social grace or restraint needed to work with mortals, but many bishops and other elders regularly exploit the system to their advantage.

Given the Sabbat disdain for mortals, many Sabbat elders prefer brutal tactics over the slow accumulation of favors to deal with recalcitrant politicians. A bishop may direct a pack of Sabbat neonates to attack the home of a politician under the pretense that the target is actually a Camarilla contact. Then, let's say the bishop sees to it that the pack's lair is booby-trapped with several fire bombs and stocked with, oh, a meth lab. In addition, she fires off an anonymous fax to a local paper outlining a revolutionary manifesto and making vague threats against elected officials. Once the carnage is over, the pack is destroyed in a fatal explosion at their lair, and the police find plenty of evidence to paint the murderers as a crazed band of would-be terrorists. The media runs with a sensationalized story of radical infiltration. The police launch a wild goose chase against imaginary revolutionaries and tension within the city skyrockets.

In truth, not all Sabbat elders follow such a scorched-earth policy. Blackmail and threats play a big role in securing political support when tearing the mayor limb from limb is a bit too heavy-handed of a plan. A favorite Sabbat tactic is to break into a politician's home — eluding security with various Disciplines — and dose the target up with a heavy trip of roofies. The Sabbat then takes their victim to some run-down brothel and snaps a host of incriminating pictures of its target cavorting with prostitutes of both sexes, animals, children or whatever else it has handy. The victim is then dumped back at his home, somewhat worse for wear. In addition, the Sabbat disposes of any kine involved in the photo shoot and leaves the bodies out for the police to discover, hanging a possible murder charge over their victim. Soon after, the Sabbat drops by for a second visit armed with the pictures and a bullet-point agenda of what it wants to see in the city. Even if the victim resigns from office, pictures of him involved in questionable activities

with several victims of brutal murders will net him at least a grand jury investigation.

If the Sabbat really wants to stick it to a victim and feels that his resignation would be as useful as cooperation, it leaves one of the corpses behind with the victim after flashing the photos. That way, if the victim chooses to hide the body rather than go to the police, he is that much further trapped in office while dealing with the Sabbat's blackmail.

The Sabbat most often uses its contacts to cripple the police and other intrusive governmental agencies. It often hands out hefty bribes to police officers in exchange for silence. While the Sabbat harbors a lot of contempt for mortals, it is smart enough to realize that antagonizing the cops is bad for hunting and generally prefers to buy or humiliate them. The treatment outlined above for politicians works equally well with uppity cops with too wide a moral streak for their own good.

When the Sabbat absolutely must not butcher prostitutes or small children in order to sway a politician, old-fashioned graft and kickbacks work just as well, as the Camarilla has proven time and again. Many of the bishops are smart enough to realize that blackmail is at best a short-term solution. Sooner or later, the kine snaps from the pressure and renders himself useless. A politician already corrupt enough to siphon funds into his own pockets and incompetent enough to disrupt mortal government must be carefully tended by the Sabbat. A weak and ineffectual government is just what the Sabbat wants, and it is more than willing to pay out campaign contributions and derail reform efforts with brutal tactics to keep it that way.

Candidates who run against the Sabbat's chosen incompetent find themselves stuffed full of sedatives and stuck in a hotel room with a cheap prostitute or freshly killed child. The Sabbat rings up the press and watches the challenge collapse. If a reporter begins harping on the administration's shortcomings, the Sabbat feeds her a few useful tips leading to minor stories based on what the Sabbat knows about the government. Once it has established a working relationship with the reporter, it then dishes her a juicy but completely false story. The Sabbat passes word along to their powers that be, allowing them to prepare counterarguments to the coming report. Once the story hits the stands and the accused provides point-by-point refutations of the story, the incident blows the reporter's credibility and calls into question all of her previous work.

Simple. Disgusting. Effective.





CHAPTER FOUR: THE STREETS

Whattaya lookin' at? You're all a bunch of fucking assholes. You know why? 'Cause you don't have the guts to be what you wanna be. You need people like me. You need people like me so you can point your fucking fingers, and say "that's the bad guy." So, what dat make you? Good? You're not good; you just know how to hide. Howta lie. Me, I don't have that problem. Me, I always tell the truth — even when I lie. So say goodnight to the bad guy. Come on. The last time you gonna see a bad guy like this, let me tell ya. Come on, make way for the bad guy. There's a bad guy comin' through. You better get outta his way.

— Scarface

"The streets" is a somewhat vague moniker, yet it is the best label for everything from the suburbs to the housing projects, the vast mass of humanity that marches to the beat set forth by institutions described elsewhere in this book. Business defines what the common man buys and does for a living. Government tells him what he can and cannot do. The social elite sets the model he follows and produces the images of success and prosperity that he chases. Yet the strength in the common man is his numbers, and a young Lick can find everything she needs for a comfortable, if somewhat static, existence among the kine.

Ambitious neonates need to run with the more desperate and dangerous of the masses. If the streets are an ecosystem, criminals are true predators. They lurk at the edges of society and contribute little while taking what they need. Of course, compared to the Kindred, the common two-bit thug is a guppy playing at being a shark, but as a quick glance at the current US prison population can tell you, there are a hell of a lot more criminals of all stripes out there than Kindred.

Murderers, thugs, rapists and drug dealers are the ultimate disposable resource. The streets crawl with them, and society as a whole doesn't pay too much attention when a criminal turns up face down in the gutter. Criminals also tend to feel that the ends justify the means. Otherwise, they wouldn't be so ready to break the law to score a hit, pull in some cash or fulfill whatever vice drives them. It's relatively easy to enlist a criminal's help once you know what he wants and how much of it you need to offer him. On the other hand, most criminals answer to no one but themselves and those with whom they directly work. No honor exists among thieves, as the saying goes, and a Kindred who places his trust in them had best watch his back.

But the threat of betrayal looms over every sort of interaction. When dealing with criminals, the Damned can always play the violence card to keep their associates in line. Most criminals can't count on the cops or media to pay them much mind, leaving a Kindred who deals with them somewhat free from the usual restraints of the Masquerade. If you knock the crap out

of Alonzo the pimp because he muscled in on your territory, he isn't about to call the police and complain that you're disrupting his business. Criminals operate outside of society's watchful eye, leaving them free to do what they may but also leaving them to deal with the Kindred on their own.

WHY WORK ON THE STREETS?

The Kindred have several considerations that make the streets an excellent place to turn. The resources and allies that are available on the streets are directly available to Kindred. You don't need expensive campaign donations or a legion of social contacts in order to gain a foothold. All you need are toughness, intelligence and street smarts. While many other social venues judge you by whom you know or what you have, raw talent is enough to survive among the dregs of the city. If you already have money and powerful friends, you don't need to turn to prostitution or drug dealing. The competition on the streets can only rarely overpower a crafty neonate, and the money and contacts accumulated there can serve as a bridge to much bigger things.

Criminals and anyone else at the lowest social levels are often somewhat desperate for a shot at the big time. They aren't picky about whom they work with, leaving even Kindred new to the scene capable of doing business. While racism is a definite barrier to establishing working relationships with some people, more often than not the average hood is ready to follow anyone who can promise him a shot at easy money. You don't need an impeccable resumé or the proper breeding to work with someone looking to rob a bank — just a gun, a good plan and a fast getaway car. Criminals can't afford to be picky, and many of them realize that if they don't jump at an opportunity, someone else is more than willing to take their place.

It doesn't take much effort to establish yourself as a power player in a neighborhood. Kick the crap out of the toughest guy in the bar and neighborhood proclaims you the new resident badass. Any creep with a gun is a force to be reckoned with. As a Kindred, you already have the raw physical and supernatural tools to overwhelm most people. When some punk pulls a gun, you only have to worry about the bullet holes ruining your shirt. Direct physical confrontation is the biggest threat to anyone involved in illegal activities, giving the undead a big advantage over mortals in this area.

The lowest levels of criminal activity, particularly those outside of large-scale organized crime, often fly beneath the elders' radar. This power vacuum leaves a lot of space for younger Kindred to throw their weight around. A simple jewelry heist that nets a few thousand dollars represents a significant score for a Kindred just establishing herself but is not worth the effort for an

elder. So long as you take care to never target businesses or individuals with connections to the city's prince or other powerful Kindred, you don't have to worry about interference from the undead powers that be.

Crime nets you cash, which is important in establishing footholds in other areas. Money paves the road to success in the business and political worlds, and even social status walks hand in hand with wealth. The streets are a very good place to start your rise to the top. As long as you can concoct some passable explanation about how you amassed your fortune, your criminal background won't hinder your eventual forays into other areas.

Street contacts cultivated now can prove quite useful in the future. If you work the drug trade and acquire a good picture of who deals in different parts of town, that information can pay off when you move on to more respectable business. If you know that the president of a certain software start-up is a coke addict, you can always blackmail him into handing some pre-IPO stock over to you for a reasonable investment. The line between illicit and legal business sometimes blurs, leaving you a prime chance to make the jump to the business world.

The streets are very dynamic. Every night brings a new round in the struggle to establish strength and dominance in a neighborhood. Few criminal success stories stay in crime. You don't find many elderly criminals on the streets because over time, the incompetents end up in jail and the ones who know what they're doing set themselves up and move on to more profitable enterprises such as extortion or drug smuggling. Some criminals even go legit. The people you face on the streets aren't exactly a cadre of Nobel Prize winners. While they make up for what they lack in experience and education with wits and street smarts, many of them flat out can't compete with the Kindred on a mental level. Grabbing a piece of the action is easy, but holding on to it for any length of time is a completely different story. The truly dangerous and smart criminals don't muck around on the streets for long.

It's worth noting that the Masquerade doesn't demand quite the concern it normally requires. The police, media and government all do their best to ignore the poor and rarely take them seriously or give them the benefit of the doubt. If you decide to get into dealing smack and break the neighborhood dealer's legs, the cops will just laugh when he tells them that a big mean vampire messed him up.

But you still have to take care not to make too much of a spectacle of yourself. Remember, the prince probably has ears at the precinct. Even if the cops ignore the stories of a Kindred trashing a smack peddler, the prince won't. Additionally, some elders or fixtures of the

prince's social circle are surprisingly familiar with the city's underbelly — more than one upstart Lick has been undone by running afoul of a slumming harpy or surly sheriff. However, you don't have to work quite so hard to keep your true nature and capabilities secret. Your main concern is avoiding the cops, like any other criminal. A Kindred's nature is much more directly (that is, physically) useful on the streets than in a boardroom or at a political fundraiser.

USEFUL CONTACTS ON THE STREETS

The social landscape of the streets poses a wide variety of potential allies. From a bored pool hustler to a freelance gun dealer ready to sell you AK-47s hot off the boat, almost everybody has something to offer the enterprising neonate. The key to working on the streets is figuring out who's valuable and who's not. Flash enough cash around, and everyone wants to be your friend no matter what you're looking for. Money attracts attention, and it also attracts those who want to know if you're smart enough to hold on to your cash. Ignorance and unreliability are both major hurdles in dealing with criminals and other smalltime operators.

INFORMANTS

The classic stool pigeon has one eye on the criminal scene and the other looking out for someone ready to pay for what he knows. Nothing takes place in absolute secrecy. Knowing who's speaking with whom is a valuable bit of info, even if you don't know the specifics of any plans. Almost anyone is a potential informant, from the barfly at the local dive to a block's resident gossip.

Money and threats are the best ways to drag information out of someone, but if you plan on building a long-term relationship with an informant, it's best to cut back on the physical stuff. An informant who can rely on you for regular payments isn't likely to feed you false info or relay what you've been asking about to others.

MUSCLE

Raw ass-kicking power is as close as the beefy guy on the barstool next to you, if you frequent the right bars. Not every tough guy you run into is ready to start busting heads for fun and profit, but with the right questions it doesn't take much effort to sift out the hard cases from the law-abiding citizens. Don't simply walk up to someone and start blathering about how you need someone to break Marshall's legs. If you've read your target incorrectly, word might get back to Marshall. Instead, work on building an amicable relationship with your prospect. Ask some discreet questions about his past and get a feel for him. If you establish yourself as a tough son of a bitch in a fight, you'll probably find tough guys naturally gravitating toward you, hoping either to take

you down and boost their rep or build a name through association with you.

Remember that muscle doesn't have to imply violence. If you need some work done on your haven but don't want to deal with unions or work permits, you can recruit skilled labor for some after-hours and off-the-books freelance work.

FENCES

If you plan on engaging in any larceny, you need someone to convert your ill-gotten gains into hard cash. Some pawnshops happily accept stolen goods, but unless you are certain there's no risk, don't pick one at random. The danger in dealing with fences is that you implicitly place your trust in the fence whenever you move goods through him. A fence could be a stool pigeon, and if the police bust him there's no guarantee he won't point them in your direction. Sell anything you steal to a variety of fences and avoid becoming reliant on any one person. Doing so keeps your options open and saves you from being tied to any particular mortal's fate — you have enough to worry about by yourself. Fences are also excellent sources of information. If you need anything outside of drugs, heavy weapons or a car, fences are your best option.

With the right mix of ambition, contacts and money, you can also set yourself up as a fence, running stolen goods and skimming the choice pieces for yourself. A crack addict who ransacks middle-class homes will gladly take a few bucks for jewelry or antiques that are worth far more than the addict can guess. Fencing is profitable so long as you don't mind keeping a somewhat exposed profile and know the kind of people — like fellow Kindred — who might be interested in your illicit wares. It also helps to be an amoral scumbag, but that's not explicitly required.

SPECIALISTS

This catchall category covers a wide variety of illegal activities that require specialized knowledge. Safecrackers, car thieves and forgers pull off crimes that are beyond the average street thug. Most kids in gangs know how to hotwire a car. A stolen car isn't a cop magnet until it's reported stolen, and if you need a functional set of wheels for a night, a stolen car could be the answer. Stolen cars are good for covering your tracks if you want to pull a drive-by shooting, robbery or other crime, but as with fences you must put your trust in someone else if you don't know how to steal a car yourself. A safecracker or forger is even more valuable, though much more difficult to find. Sneaking into a rival Kindred's haven is all well and good, but if she has her really important possessions locked away in a bomb-proof safe, your safecracker is going to come in very handy, even if he is a mere human.

SLUM LORDS

Everyone needs a bolthole. Ideally, your haven is both secure and somewhat unobtrusive, but if the cops are on your tail or the Sabbat is gunning for you, it's very handy to have a low-profile crash space in a part of town that's easy to blend into. A haven is useless if someone willing to torch the place or storm it in broad daylight, such as the police or the Sabbat, tracks you back to it. A vacant house in the 'burbs draws attention and is usually too far from the action to be convenient, and a secure spare penthouse is beyond the means of most neonates.

A cheap apartment outfitted for your needs can prove quite useful. With the landlord in your pocket, you can ensure your security and the secrecy of your spare haven. While such a crash space isn't a good solution in the long term, if you need a place to sweat out a few days it could be the margin between survival and destruction. Pad your landlord's wallet with enough cash and you shouldn't have much trouble from him. If you can find a landlord with a taste for stolen luxuries or any other illegal commodity that you can provide, so much the better. The chances of his screwing you over are the much lower if you hold something over him.

FRINGE GROUPS

Political and religious extremists operate on the street level because they lack the money, respectability or prestige to work anywhere else. Most fringe groups rely upon either a very strong and charismatic leader to hold them together or a focused, central goal or mission that breeds cohesion and stability within the group. Any group too poor or too shunned by the mainstream to work in legitimate circles is probably tightly organized and highly motivated. Otherwise, the group would have long ago splintered in the face of setbacks. A group that makes no progress toward its goals has trouble retaining members, but the ones who stick around probably have a fanatical belief in the group's goals.

Many fringe groups center around a charismatic leader, particularly religious cults. If a group believes that its leader regularly speaks with and receives guidance from some spiritual entity, the rank-and-file members probably don't question his decisions. Militia groups and political radicals with violent agendas often organize themselves in a military hierarchy, with one central commander dispatching orders to those beneath him. These groups are prime targets for Kindred, as you need only to subvert the leader in order to bend the entire organization to your will. The leader's already done the rest of your work for you.

Many group leaders, however, either have everything they want provided by their followers or

are dyed-in-the-wool fanatics who truly believe in what the group strives for. Your best course of action is to create a need for the leader that only you can provide or to force the leader into the position of depending on you to further his group's goals. If a paranoid militia group needs assault weapons to repulse the UN invasion they're sure is just over the horizon, hook them up with some guns at cut-rate prices, telling them that you believe in the cause and want to help out. Doing so makes you instantly valuable to the group, popular with the rank-and-file members and establishes a relationship with the group's leader. Selling them guns several times, to the point that the group depends on you, leaves you in a position to push the group in the direction you want it to go.

Fringe groups make excellent allies for a Kindred working the streets. Unlike criminals, cultists and extremists are somewhat dependable. Support their cause and they will support you. Allies are simply too rare for them to pass up, and groups that hold unpopular views often welcome those who share their values as comrades-in-arms.

Cults and radical groups are also prime bait for subversion. Fringe groups can serve as grunts for illegal operations, especially if the leader is exceptionally revered by the membership. A cultist can unwittingly serve as a drug or weapons courier, unwilling to ask exactly what's in the gym bag you've asked him to deliver and capable of maintaining silence "for the cause" in the face of police interrogation.

ORGANIZED CRIME

The gap between "disorganized" crime — smalltime dope dealers, pickpockets, muggers — and organized crime — the Mafia, triads, Colombian cartels — is enormous and largely unbridgeable. Most criminals involved in major crimes look down upon other crooks as amateurs and screwups. Part of this attitude traces back to the racial and family lines that permeate most organized crime groups. Unless you are from the right family or ethnic group, you will never be fully accepted as a member of the organized crime world. While a smart and obviously useful person can worm his way in, he's always a visitor or outsider, never a true member. This barrier represents the greatest hurdle between the Kindred and organized crime. Unless you were born of the right ethnic group, and often if you didn't run with the right crowd while alive, you have little chance of truly making it in organized crime.

That's not to say that the Damned and groups such as the Mafia have no use for one another. However, it does mean that you can't expect to advance too far in organized crime unless your blood's doubly suitable.



Organized crime offers higher and more consistent profits than common street crime. Crime syndicates quickly involve themselves in most of the profitable illegal activities in a city and work hard to maintain their grip on them, going to great lengths to either destroy rivals or extract a cut of the take from them. Working with organized crime also has the advantage that your enemies are often very clearly identified, as most rivalries are long established. The obvious battle lines might make you a target for your partner's rivals, but it does cut down on the threat of random attacks from unexpected quarters. The inherent stability of the profits and the relatively clear-cut division between friend and foe make organized crime the best place for Kindred who do not feel comfortable operating on their own, especially for those who don't feel comfortable in personally taking on challengers.

The visibility of organized crime is its biggest drawback. Only the newest syndicates can even hope to operate without some sort of police observation, and even then, only for as long as they remain inconsequential — which defeats the purpose. Should you work with organized crime, the cops' gaze will sooner or later fall upon you. For the Kindred, this attention can be fatal. With cops trailing your every move, you can't afford to

feed casually or move about freely. You also risk drawing attention to your Kindred allies and other associates; the cops will undoubtedly check up on your known cohorts should they decide to investigate you. While a police investigation is possible for any Kindred involved with crime, working with organized crime virtually guarantees it.

Often, organized crime seeks you out, rather than the other way around. If you engage in any illegal activity more complex or subtle than simple robberies, such as bookmaking or prostitution, the Mob will most likely see you as a competitor and move to eliminate your presence or, failing that, cut a deal with you. The reigning organized crime group in the area may demand protection money from you, and unless you want to wage a war that you have little chance of winning, your best bet is to pay up and hope for the best. The Mafia, like any business, values intelligent people who can pull in a profit. If you run a smooth operation and manage to avoid stepping on anyone's toes, a crime syndicate may elect to integrate you into their organization. Your chances of advancing in the organization are extremely slim, for the reasons cited above, but if you prove to be useful and do so without making too many enemies, you can carve a niche out in the local criminal power structure.

If the local powers that be decide that your operation must be destroyed, you don't have too many options. You could potentially engage in an all-out war with the Mob, but unless you have the manpower to rival it and extremely deep pockets, you aren't going to win. If you're "solo," you'd be wise to look over both shoulders before you leave your haven in the evening. Also, the police and FBI keep a watch on organized crime. If you touch off a Mob war, count on police and federal agents taking a special interest in you and your background. The risks inherent in engaging in a crime war easily overwhelm the potential gains. Even if a Kindred could pull out a victory and establish himself as a kingpin, the attention from criminal rivals and the authorities would push the Masquerade to the breaking point.

Aside from leadership positions, Kindred can and do fill a few other roles in organized crime. Obviously, the Damned make valuable hit men. The gangs aren't likely to ask exactly how you entered someone's house unseen and took out a target during a crowded party, and if they did they wouldn't run to the press with the news. Organized crime is opportunistic and competitive enough that of all mortal organizations, it is the one most likely to turn a blind eye to any evidence of the supernatural. A tough Kindred can make a very profitable living by killing, and muscle work is one area in which most organized crime groups are willing to work with outsiders. Crime bosses often prefer to leave the dirty, and easily prosecutable, work to others.

Moving into this line of work requires a little luck and hard work, but in the long run it can pay off handsomely. A Kindred who makes a name for himself on the streets as a skilled and deadly shooter may find organized crime figures approaching him with offers for work. On the other hand, such a Kindred is just as likely to be targeted as a rival and slated for destruction, if he has taken down the wrong targets or angered the wrong people.

Where more cerebral Kindred shine, however, is in "new business." Already skilled at maintaining the Masquerade, clever undead can extrapolate their knowledge to money laundering. Knowing finance almost always coincides with knowing lending rates — and every point above the vig that a loansharking operation makes is more comfort for the enterprising Lick. Even low-level schemes like prostitution, protection and bookmaking have their place, and with an organized crime group as a backer, they're likely to be the only operations of those types in a given criminal territory. Drugs, the perennial devil's deal in organized crime, pay off extremely well for those syndicates willing to become involved with them.

It is also important to keep tabs on the city's criminals if you want to work with them or avoid their wrath. Organized crime extends its resources and influence into almost every level of crime. Pissing off even a smalltime bookie can spell trouble for you down the road if that bookie works for the wrong people. Kindred who want to aggressively expand into the criminal world have to take care to avoid the wrath of organized crime. Much like the Kindred, the Mafia, tongs, cartels and other such groups operate outside the realm of mortal society. They can and will use deadly force against Licks, and though most have a sort of Masquerade of their own to observe, no method is too brutal for them.

PATHS TO POWER

There are three basic avenues to respect, influence and resources on the streets. Violence is always a surefire way to catch anyone's attention, and on the mean streets it is the most decisive way to deal with your enemies and grab what you want. Money is just as valuable to a criminal as it is to a politician or would-be starlet, and most people operating at the bottom rungs of society see amassing cash as their primary goal in life. The social element of the streets is probably even more important than any other spheres in which the Damned work. So many street interactions take place face to face that a Kindred's personality and actions have a big effect on how successful she can be. Politicians might be willing to accept donations from an unknown and somewhat eccentric figure, but the local crime boss isn't about to hire someone without a reputation as a tightlipped professional. Reputation is critical on the streets.

THE BRUTE FORCE METHOD

Everyone understands violence, and on the streets it's the most direct route to respect, though it isn't necessarily a path toward respectability. Taking out a dozen heavies in a brawl serves notice that there's a new predator in town, one who it's best to steer clear of. Fear is a great tool for keeping the riffraff away, but it's not so useful if you're seeking to establish yourself with those outside of the criminal element. The Damned, as predators among humans, are well suited to this path. The Kindred's unnaturally enhanced strength and toughness make it possible for a neonate who never previously raised his fist in anger to kick the living shit out of a neighborhood's resident tough guy.

Violence is useful when dealing with criminals because most criminals can't turn to the police if they themselves are the victims of a crime. The last thing a criminal wants is any contact with the police, especially if he's engaged in any ongoing illegal

activity. You don't see the local Yakuza kingpin calling the cops if a rival bumps off one of his lieutenants, do you? Most criminals do not want to damage their reputation on the street by working with the cops. On the streets, the police are often mistrusted, if not hated. Working with them marks someone as either weak or untrustworthy. Nobody wants to work with a rat, and in the predatory world of crime, the weak are quickly surrounded and devoured by the ambitious.

Since the police aren't a resource that criminals can turn to for protection, the Kindred usually have free reign to flaunt their physical superiority when dealing with criminals, so long as doing so doesn't attract the cops' attention. A Gangrel tough can drag a smart-mouthed punk into an alleyway and rearrange his face in the interest of establishing his reputation as a tough bastard, but if he goes on rampage in a bar and pounds half-a-dozen people into insurance settlements, the police are bound to notice. Violence in a public place attracts attention because someone on the scene is liable to call the police. It's stupid and naïve to assume that everyone in a bar or club located in the wrong part of town is going to turn a blind eye toward a rampaging thug.

A Lick must take care to avoid making herself a threat to people whom he doesn't need to threaten. Violence, while brutal and messy, must be applied in a carefully controlled manner. Terrifying the wrong people only buys a Kindred far more trouble from the cops than she needs. Striking fear into the right people, though, buys a Kindred instant respect and establishes the right kind of reputation.

The Damned can use violence to establish a very useful reputation on the streets. The quickest way to scare off most competitors is to pick a fight with the toughest guy in a neighborhood and beat him within an inch of his life. Once word of the deed spreads, most people will give you a wide berth. On the other hand, such an action can attract the attention of people who need muscle. A Kindred who establishes himself as an urban predator can also leverage that reputation into a following. Nobody wants to be on the wrong side of the meanest motherfucker in the neighborhood, and some people may go so far as to actively curry his favor. Violence is common enough in crime that anyone capable of kicking ass is a useful ally.

A violent reputation also carries over into other criminal dealings. People are much more likely to fulfill their debts to you if they know that you're capable of following through on the threats you make. Gun dealers are much less likely to rip you off, and any informants may think twice before mentioning your name to the police.

It is important, though, to avoid overdoing it. Regularly resorting to violence may drive potential contacts away from you, and every murder or assault courts police involvement. Also, a Kindred who establishes a reputation as the toughest SOB around may attract rivals who look to challenge that reputation. The cops may also decide that it's time for a show of force in the underworld. If the cops can take down the baddest of the bad, they send a clear message to the remaining people on the streets that no one is exempt from the law. Kindred who make a name for themselves with violence must always remember that reputations draw both wanted and unwanted attention.

Needless to say, violence isn't always useful when directly dealing with noncriminals. However, a violent reputation can be useful if you are careful to mold your reputation in just the right way. A Cainite who wants to win over the residents of a housing project could become a vigilante, beating down criminals who victimize the residents and enforcing the law in a much more efficient manner than the police. While this application of violence isn't quite as financially profitable as other methods, socially it can reap many benefits. The residents of that housing project probably won't speak of their guardian angel to the police for fear of losing his protection, and the drop in crime keeps the police and other authorities clear of the Kindred's stomping grounds.

Like any tool, violence has more than one possible application. While it is generally useful for establishing a fearsome reputation and best used to directly confront enemies, it can be applied indirectly. Violence itself isn't subtle, but its benefits can be.

BUYING INFLUENCE

Money is just as useful on the streets as anywhere else. Most criminal activity centers on taking or making money, and most people who operate at the level of the streets see stockpiling money as the best way to improve their lot in life. Money attracts criminals like shit draws flies, bringing both wanted and unwanted attention to a wealthy Kindred. Obvious signs of wealth, such as jewelry, an expensive car or designer clothes, can have one of two effects. If a Kindred doesn't have a reputation on the streets, flashing wealth around is likely to make him a target. This attention can be useful if a Lick wants to make an example of people who mess with him. If a Kindred already has the reputation as a tough person best not messed with, ostentatious wealth can further reinforce that reputation and impress people who know him only by what they've heard. No one's going to take a crime lord seriously if he drives a beat-to-hell Accord and wears ratty sweatpants around the neighborhood. People from all walks of life tend to judge the success

of others by what they own, and on the streets where poverty is so rampant this trend is even more important. Even among noncriminals, money can buy instant respect, though many people on the streets instantly assume that anyone with money who hasn't moved on to more attractive areas is likely a criminal.

The most direct application of money is using it to establish a presence in an illegal trade. As in any legal business, the more cash you have on hand, the better off you are in establishing an enterprise. Investing in a gym bag full of guns to establish yourself as an arms dealer is, on a practical level, no different than buying a piece of real estate and sinking money into a strip mall that you can fill with Blockbusters and Subways. In both cases, you can expect to need cash to hire help, impress potential investors and build up supplies to run the business.

Money is also useful for dealing with the authorities. It's always handy to have an expensive lawyer on call for handling the police, and a few bribes in the right place can insulate a Kindred from police interference and potential prosecution. It never hurts to have someone down at the precinct. Bribery also has the added benefit that clever undead who think ahead can easily hold on to evidence of the bribes, should the need arise to turn bribery into blackmail.

Cash is the one language that every criminal speaks. Whether you need a cat burglar, a hit man or a car thief, everybody could always use more money. Cash is flexible and I can think of few situations on the streets that you can't buy your way out of. The danger is that in throwing money around, you may make yourself a target. Just as criminals are drawn to money, throw enough cash around and criminals will be drawn to you. Thus, money and violence often go hand in hand. Unless you have the reputation as being capable of holding on to what you have, be prepared to defend it. The more money others think you have, the more likely and more determined those who come after you will be.

Don't let this go without saying, though: Money is also very useful when dealing with noncriminals. A few dollars can usually buy someone's silence, especially if you don't want them talking to the police. Since those who live on the streets are at the bottom of the economic ladder, it usually doesn't take much money to impress them. Pumping money into the local community center buys you the good will of the people around you, helping to build a social shield between you and those who come gunning for you, from the cops to rivals on the street. Nobody wants to kill the goose that lays the golden egg, just as nobody wants to rat on the guy who, though he's a pimp or a racketeer, buys the kids in the apartment building toys at Christmas when their parents can't afford them.

FAVORS AND SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

No one is too small or unimportant to help out a Lick on the streets. The mortician down the street who wants someone to beat the hell out of the punk who tried to rape his daughter may one night be willing to help dispose of a body in return for that favor. The pusher-gone-straight who organizes the neighborhood's midnight basketball league might be willing to feed tips on trafficking activity to the guy who paid to rent out the gym. Walk in on a convenience store robbery, kick the crap out of the would-be stickup man, and the owner may be willing to look the other way and lie to the police when you duck into his store as the cops sweep the neighborhood. A neighborhood is ultimately a social setting. The people who operate there more than likely live there, making any acquaintances and allies you cultivate dependable and useful resources. While operating on a very small scale, the payoff can be immeasurable. An ally available when you desperately need one is far more valuable than a legion of millionaire stockbrokers, none of whom can help you at 3 a.m. when you need someone to hide the heroin you just stole from the Cubans. Who your allies are isn't as important as what they're willing to do and when they're able to do it.

While it is often useful to cultivate a fearsome image among criminals, the opposite image is preferable when dealing with law-abiding people on the streets. While no one is liable to talk to the police about Kindred they see as a threat, no one is liable to actively help out that Kindred, either. A Lick who cultivates a good image in the neighborhood, dealing harshly only with those who cross him and treating others with respect, can quickly become an esteemed and important member of the community. A Kindred who makes an effort to deal with neighborhood problems, especially those that the police are unwilling or unable to handle, can find himself as almost a hero to the people around him.

Relying on the little people on the streets carries some risk. The biggest drawback to this approach is that a Kindred must be willing to sometimes push aside his own goals and desires in order to maintain his social standing. Do it, though — it's not like you don't have forever. Once a Kindred takes care of problems for the people around him, this behavior quickly becomes an expectation. The Damned who have won the respect and admiration of a neighborhood must work hard to keep it. Every failure on their part could potentially signal the end of their influence. Proving unreliable over time is the quickest way to invalidate favors owed to you and turn the community against you. When a Kindred becomes a part of the community, she turns her back on that community at her own risk.

PITFALLS

The street poses its own unique obstacles for Kindred who choose to operate there. While the lack of governmental interference and the free reign that young Kindred enjoy make them an attractive place for neonates to carve out an existence, the streets aren't without their dangers. Some of them are connected to working with criminals, while others are endemic to the nature of the streets.

The streets are where many success stories begin but few end. A Kindred cannot expect to operate at the streets forever unless she's willing to accept an implicit cap on her potential to expand her influence. Many elders and ancillae ignore the streets because the prospects there are simply too small to bother with. Why establish a protection racket in Chinatown that brings in a few thousand when the same time and effort can go into leveraging a corporate buyout that brings in millions? A Kindred with long-term plans dreams of running with the nocturnal elite cannot expect to hold on to what she earned on the streets forever. A vicious left hook and the capability to absorb bullet wounds might impress the skinheads loitering on the corner, but they don't do much for a Lick whose haven has been condemned and slated for demolition through the machinations of a vengeful elder. So long as a vampire sticks to the streets, her options and potential to advance in Kindred society will always be limited.

That's not to say that success on the street won't prove useful in future endeavors. The streets interact with politics on fundamental levels, but time on the streets usually makes a Lick tougher rather than richer. The streets are a great place for a neonate to start or an ancilla to consolidate, but sooner or later, any Kindred worth her centuries is going to want to move up in the world.

Probably, that is. In some cases, you've got elders who don't mind "slumming," or whose ambitions have never led them to aim beyond the hood. Down here, you have your embittered Nosferatu Fagins, your timeless Malkavian street prophets, your king-hell Gangrel war bosses and anyone else who's got the experience of centuries but for whatever reason doesn't want to spend it in the luxury of a salon, Elysium or in the Resistory (or whatever the Sabbat calls its version of Elysium).

On the streets, treachery always looms around the corner. A business partner may clean out your bank account, but someone who commits crimes with you can sell you out the police or kill you over a deal gone bad. Most criminals are desperate to get ahead by any means. It's practically a given that people willing to

commit crimes are not the most upright and honorable people around. The climb to the top is littered with violence and betrayal. For every person a Kindred takes down, he makes another enemy.

Violence is another constant threat on the streets. A Kindred's strengths and immunity to many forms of damage minimize this risk, but a bomb planted in a Lick's car will destroy him if the person who planted it did so knowing that fire is particularly deadly to the Kindred. The freewheeling nature of the streets may give the undead a free reign to exercise their superiority, but that freedom works in both directions. The people a Kindred deals with on the streets are much less likely to balk at taking down a rival with violence, whereas in other areas violence and other illegal activities must be carefully concealed.

The instability of the streets makes it difficult for many Kindred to maintain their affairs over the long term. Kindred have a tendency to lock into certain behaviors and become somewhat static. The streets, on the other hand, are a mercurial environment where rapid adaptation and quick thinking are necessary for long term survival. Crime is a young man's game. Few gang members remain active past their early 20s, either heading off to jail, dying or bowing down in deference to more aggressive, charismatic or successful leaders. While organized crime does not exhibit as rapid a rate of turnover, the power structures there are equally mutable. The Damned value stability and peace among mortals, and large, static social structures nurture such an environment. Power groups on the street are often small and fleeting. The death of a single charismatic leader can splinter a gang, and one false step can land a significant *mafia* in jail and rearrange the power structure that once operated beneath him. The Kindred must remain on their toes, ready to take action in the face of sudden change. Given the nature of the undead, this is often too demanding for Kindred of appreciable age.

Criminal activities also have a way of coming back to haunt you. Once the police launch an investigation, you risk that a mistake from your past will return to cause trouble. A criminal associate may, five years after working with you, come to trial for a crime unrelated to any crimes you committed with him. Yet, in an effort to cop a plea, he may offer your name as bait to the authorities. If you're tied to a serious enough crime, the police may follow up on the lead and track you down, deadfella. No crime occurs in a vacuum, and every felony that a Kindred commits leaves him open to trouble in the future. While a Kindred must be careful in choosing his allies, no amount of preparation can prevent problems from cropping up five or 10 years down the line.

The worst thing about this threat is that it is almost impossible to predict. Unless a Kindred is committed to expending a generous amount of time and effort keeping tabs on past associates, chances are he doesn't even perceive a threat like this coming until it's too late. A low profile is sometimes invaluable on the streets. While this is not always possible, most of the Damned try not to grow too close or reveal too much about themselves to any mortals they work with, whether on the streets or wherever they make their fortunes.

The greatest threat to any Kindred who operates on the streets is the police. The cops are the Masquerade personified, ready to pounce on and expose the undead who are unwise enough to leave their tracks uncovered or who operate in far too visible a manner. For a Kindred, jail time can very well prove fatal. A simple daytime court date is a legal nightmare.

Compounding this problem is the police's relative immunity to violence. A shortsighted Kindred could probably mow through cops as easily as any other mortals, but a police officer killed in the line of duty has hundreds of fellow cops eager to take down his killer. Cop killers are viciously and relentlessly hunted by law enforcement, both out of a sense of camaraderie and out of a drive to demonstrate to criminals that police officers are off-limits as far as violence goes. Furthermore, a cop's murder invariably draws tremendous amounts of local media coverage, calling far more attention to the situation than most Kindred are willing to deal with.

The Damned's best bet in dealing with the police is to take preemptive actions, such as bribery or information peddling, in order to win a few allies on the police force. I've talked before here and there about the methods useful in dealing with government, and much of that information is equally applicable to dealing with the police. But all bets are off when a cop goes down. No number of bribes and favors can turn the police away from the chase, as even a politician or high-ranking police officer can't afford to pull men off the case. Doing so more than likely triggers a loss of the police's confidence, allegations of being soft on crime and career-derailing criticism from a wide variety of police, political and civic groups.

RESOURCES ON THE STREETS

The streets offer a variety of resources ripe for the picking. Enterprising young Kindred can establish a comfortable existence from the fruits of minor crimes and from establishing good relationships with the common people around them.

SUSTENANCE

The faceless masses of the streets are a good source of food for a young Lick; the "Barrens" have long been

a popular feeding venue for those on the outs with higher undead society or without claim to their own hunting grounds. Attacks on those at the lowest social and economic levels are likely to be ignored or investigated in the most cursory manner by the police. Stories of a fanged attacker operating in the slums are much more likely to be written off as hysteria and urban legends than if the same stories were to originate from upper class and suburban neighborhoods. More importantly, if the prince pays the poor areas of town little mind, young Kindred have much more freedom to feed and need not worry about stepping on anyone's toes.

The rare hunter groups and other supernaturals still pose a threat. While the streets are easy hunting grounds, always hunt in a careful and cautious manner. The pickings are easier, but they are rarely without complications.

PROTECTION

A Kindred who has treated the mortals around his haven well and nurtured their trust and respect can rely on much more support and aid than one who has shunned social contact with the kine. While the old lady who lives in apartment 4A isn't about to take down a surly sheriff who's looking for you, she is likely to notice him and pass word along to you. The Sabbath in particular rarely expects the kine to pose any threat, and unless they are feeding rarely pay any attention to them. A few bystanders who warn you about the fierce-looking thugs who rolled into town can spell the difference between survival and destruction.

On the other hand, criminal ties can also serve to keep a Kindred safe. Those among the Damned who establish successful networks of criminal contacts and pull in a sizeable income from protection rackets or robberies have the resources necessary to hire and equip some serious muscle. A haven is much more secure if a few trusted, sharp-eyed "friends" can watch over the place during daylight hours. The hired help doesn't even need to know that they are actually guarding a sleeping Kindred. A simple cover story — "Man, am I hung-over again" or "I gotta sleep all day to keep up at night" — can prevent the guards from becoming a security threat.

A different but similar form of protection is insulation from prosecution. A Kindred could very well make his true nature known to his criminal associates. A Nosferatu could use his Disciplines to appear at meetings seemingly from thin air and leave in a similar manner, making it almost impossible for mortals to tail him and discover anything more about his background. If the Nosferatu's associates wind up in jail, the police are more than likely to laugh off their claims of an invisible, alien-looking ringleader. Of course,



such an audacious maneuver is an utter breach of the Masquerade. The prince undoubtedly would have a few carefully chosen and rather strong words to share with a neonate who pulled a stunt like this, and hunter groups might descend on the city in droves if word of a "monster crime lord" hits the media. If a rival Kindred has connections in the police department, the cops may very well look into the stories of a monstrous ringleader. A young Kindred can use this ploy to set up criminal associates as patsies, but it is important to not overdo the vampire schtick, lest a Lick draw too much attention to himself.

MATERIAL RESOURCES

Many handy accouterments such as assault weapons, cheap (but effective) explosives and other illegal goods are available on the street to those with deep pockets. Such resources are useful in dealing with both mortals and the undead, and they can also be quickly converted back into cash if the need to do so arises. Street contacts put a Kindred in touch with the right sellers, while criminal activity can give a Kindred the financial resources necessary to make the sale. An ambitious neonate could potentially set herself up as a broker for other undead, buying arms and drugs from the streets and reselling them to the city's Kindred community at a hefty markup. While the more socially oriented Damned probably have their own contacts through whom they could make such purchases, other neonates and even some cloistered elders might prefer to work with a Kindred contact rather than risk the Masquerade in dealing with mortals.

INFORMATION

Many political and social movements first take root on the streets. A neonate can position herself to use this information to her economic and social advantage. A Kindred in touch with the local music scene could steer a hot new act in the direction of a record label that an elder owns an interest in. When that band touches off a new music craze, the neonate is sure to draw the elder's favor.

The information available on the streets isn't usually valuable in and of itself. Typically, it's the application and timing of that information that generates value. In the example of the band, knowing about a potentially talented musician is much more valuable early in that musician's career, when she hasn't signed a contract and has no labels courting her. Most information gathered on the streets is of dubious utility to the Kindred, and the sheer effort needed to gather leads and follow up on them in search of a potential profit discourages many neonates. On the other hand, the lack of competition

means that a single determined young Kindred stands to turn quite a profit with minimal risk of conflict with other Licks.

Information on fellow Kindred can prove equally valuable. An elder involved at the highest levels of organized crime is just as threatened by a police investigation as a car-jacking neonate. Turning the police loose on a rival is a very effective tactic, but Kindred must take care when dealing with elders. Most elders have enough contacts in local government and resources to discourage a police investigation, but less experienced rivals might not.

A Kindred could also use information on an elder's criminal dealings to place herself in a position to attract the elder's attention with her competence and skill, earning an elder's favor and paving the way to advancement in the Kindred power structure. If an ambitious coterie learns that the prince draws part of his income through association with a gang of kidnapers, they could cripple a rival "expert" who attempts to move in on the prince's ally's territory, earning an favor with an important figure in the process. The same information could be sold to the prince's rivals, used personally by the coterie at a later date to hamstring one of the prince's resources. The Kindred could even track the kidnapers and uncover more information on the prince's activities and domain. The gulf between the streets and those in power is vast, but not unbridgeable.

THE SABBAT

The streets are the natural stomping grounds for the Sabbath's lower echelons and even for some members of its leadership. Nomadic packs have little use for establishing stakes in businesses or politicians. These packs often work solely at the street level and never really interact with any other sphere of society unless they are directly attacking the Camarilla or glutting themselves on vitae. There's no point in spending time on earning a contact in Miami when you're planning on rolling up to Atlanta in a few weeks. Sabbath activity aims for short-term gains and often deals in physical violence and brutality.

More subtle tactics are the province of the bishops, other Sabbath elders and non-nomadic packs. However, many young Lasombra and other status-minded Sabbath neonates often take the time to establish a few enduring contacts with criminals and other street level mortals, using many of the tactics described in my little screed. The Sabbath often relies on a reign of terror to keep the kine sufficiently intimidated. Cops are just as much a target as any other mortal, and one of the problems that the Sabbath causes for the Camarilla is its nonchalant attitude toward slaughtering mortals and poking at the

homet's nest that is a city's government. The Sabbath's disdain for the Masquerade makes it a danger to the Camarilla even when a Sabbath pack merely passes through an area.

Many young Sabbath packs personally engage in crime to meet their needs. If a pack needs a car, it descends on the nearest motorist and takes it. If it needs some artillery, it kicks in the front window of a gun shop. If the pack needs some batteries, it rolls into a convenience store, takes what it needs, and busts up the poor slob behind the counter just for the hell of it. When a Sabbath pack is in town and operating on the streets, the Masquerade is often pushed to the breaking point.

Sabbath Cainites sometimes work with mortals, but they often prefer those who are already at the Sabbath's mercy. Most Sabbath are simply uncomfortable working with a mortal on anything approaching equal footing. Drug dealing is a common Sabbath activity on the streets because many narcotics are easily manufactured with a minimum investment. Drug users are a ripe pool of exploitable kine, as many of them are willing to engage in illegal activity for the Sabbath in return for a few hits of their preferred substance. Once an addict has outlived his usefulness, the Sabbath can easily take him out or just pass him a hot does — or just write him off and leave him to his own devices, because who's going to believe a babbling meth junkie?

Of course, addicts aren't the most reliable contacts, but they are disposable and easily cowed. A Sabbath dealer need only threaten to cut off his supply to force his customers into line. This option is also appealing to the Sabbath because it takes place under the radar of most police forces. A new dealer on the block isn't exactly big news, and the Sabbath disposes of any existing or emerging rivals on the market with relative ease.

The Sabbath is also as likely to engage in truly heinous illegal activities — such as child pornography and forced prostitution — as individual members of our glorious Camarilla. While ivory-tower Kindred must take care to avoid entangling themselves in anything that could attract too much mortal attention, the Sabbath is mobile enough that its packs can simply move on to a new city during an intense media or police investigation. Part of the Sabbath's motivation behind this focus on such crimes is its members' tendency to see mortals as little more than an exploitable resource. Furthermore, the kine who come out of the woodwork to make use of their services often make excellent candidates for blackmail and intimidation in the future. The Sabbath has no problems with using the

decadent, horrid practices it provides as blackmail material against its customers. A pack dealing in snuff films might keep careful track of its customers, eagerly waiting for an individual in a position of power to stumble into the web it has cast.

A common Sabbat tactic is to ferret out the local criminals, establish working relationships with them and then ruthlessly murder and replace them with their own blackmailed or (however tenuously) allied contacts, or occupy their positions personally. A Sabbat pack might seek out an arms dealer, purchase a few guns from him over time, learn about his contacts and other customers, and then rub him out, steal his existing stock and take his place in the criminal hierarchy. This tactic is very common among packs that are new to a city, as it is a quick source of income — whatever the guy was selling — and also draws out any aggressive kine that must be dealt with at some point anyway. An aggressive initial action allows the Sabbat to deal with any difficult kine sooner rather than later.

Bishops and other high-ranking Sabbat elders often do business with criminals, and many of them leverage underworld contacts into footholds in other areas of mortal activity. Politicians involved in crime make prime Sabbat targets for blackmail schemes and other brutal methods of winning allies, willingly or not, in government, business and other arenas. The tactics that the bishops use are generally less destructive than those used by the neonate packs, but the emphasis on using mortals, rather than working with them, is noticeable throughout the sect. The Sabbat leadership prefers to build its own organizations from the ground up, rather than relying upon existing mortal ones. Tradition and stasis work against the upstart Sabbat, and the more instability that the Sabbat can introduce into a city, the less likely the Camarilla can effectively compete with it in the underworld. Struggles between the two sects for dominance on the streets are often the first signs of bigger trouble.





CHAPTER FIVE: OUTSIDE THE BOX

A slave has but one master; an ambitious man has as many masters as there are people who may be useful in bettering his position.

— Jean de la Bruyère

In mortal society, as with everything else, certain ideas and institutions aren't easily pigeonholed into any specific category. They don't lend themselves to labeling or classification. Governments and corporations may rule the political world (not necessarily in that order), but that hardly means that no one outside those particular spheres is a useful tool. Fashion and fad may move at the whim of a select few at the top of the social ladder, but society itself is steered and influenced by an enormous combination of entities, many of which simply do not qualify as businesses, governments, societies or anything else.

The Kindred — or at least those among them who see beyond the confines of more conventional sources of power — lick their lips at the thought of these “forgotten” institutions that fall outside the consideration of most neonates. The average person raised in the modern world, at least in the West, no longer thinks of the Church as a particularly powerful institution. Most neonates are going to focus their attentions elsewhere. Granted, should you buck the trend and attempt to

establish a beachhead here, you're still going to find yourself at odds with the elders who've been a part of Mother Church since her inception, but at least you've narrowed down the competition.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, certain aspects of kine civilization are so new that the elders haven't the first clue how to go about making use of them. Many of society's subcultures are utterly alien to the static, inflexible elders, most of whom would rather dismiss a new innovation as useless than force themselves to alter an age-old mindset.

Whichever angle you prefer, the benefits are substantial. An arena with less Kindred interest is one in which you're going to find it that much easier to establish and hold a power base. Fewer enemies chipping away at your foundation means more time that you can spend focused on what you're actually trying to accomplish. Staying away from the more “traditional” fields of endeavor also makes you far less predictable to your rivals. A Kindred who has made a bid for power in three separate government departments is far easier to

anticipate than one who's grabbed at one government office, the city's largest university and that shaven-headed new age cult on Fourth Street and Taft.

Acquiring influence is something of a tricky endeavor in and of itself. Most of the institutions presented in this chapter don't have the same sort of governing hierarchy as other, more traditional organizations. You can't provide venture capital to CNN, or buy stock in the Aryan Nation, or fund the reelection campaign of your diocese's archbishop. Most of the techniques for getting ahead in business, government and other such institutions won't work here, because most of those tactics focus on gathering influence over the bureaucracy; most of the entities presented in this chapter require more-personal involvement. The three B's — bribes, blackmail and blood bonds — are once again your best options.

The challenge, then, is choosing precisely *who* you need to have in your pocket. It's all well and good to have one of the board of directors of MSNBC at your beck and call, but how much control do they really have over the receipt and dissemination of the news? Suborning Captain Scott at Parris Island doesn't do you any good if he has to go through other officers — officers who *aren't* under your thumb, officers who are going to wonder exactly why Captain Scott is requisitioning a helicopter, night-vision goggles and a flamethrower — to get what you want.

This part of my growing guerrilla handbook presents you with a small selection of the "miscellaneous" institutions and organizations that might just interest a Kindred attempting to wrest some authority from the elders who already have it. Each is presented along with a sampling of advantages provided by influence over that particular entity, and tips on how to go about acquiring said

POOR RELATIONS AND ALSO-RANS

As stated above, one of the best reasons to tackle a "miscellaneous" interest or entity is the fact that many of the Kindred consider these sorts of organizations to be second-best, the consolation prizes that one pursues only after failing to acquire "real" power. Let them go on making that mistake — but don't fall into the trap of thinking that way yourself.

Just because something falls under none of the previous categories in *The Gilded Cage* doesn't mean it's of any less use to an enterprising Cainite. As with everything else, you can accomplish things with these entities that you couldn't do with a corporation or crime syndicate. The independent clans and the Caitiff will be the first to tell you — the fact that something doesn't fit in doesn't make it any less valuable.

influence. Trust me; I've seen this shit in action. Remember also that these are guidelines, not rules. The techniques suggested may not always work the way you'd hoped, the benefits given aren't the only ones you might think of, and the fact that it's *usually* the Ventrue or Setites that are most interested in this particular sort of institution doesn't mean that they'll *always* be the ones you're dealing with. Elder Kindred have become creatures of stasis, refusing to reevaluate their positions when circumstances change. Don't let yourself fall into that trap.

ACADEMIA

Ah, the halls of learning. Here, in the echoing corridors and open campuses of colleges and universities, the future is meticulously constructed, one student building-block at a time. Drawn to these hallowed halls by their love of learning and their desire to advance their chosen field, bright young men and women from all over the world gather together to create tomorrow.

Raise your hand if you think that's the way it really is.

Didn't think so. The Western world's universities have been known to produce the occasional graduate who really does have an interest in his chosen field, but these ambitious individuals are by far the exception, not the rule. Most of the time, such institutes of "higher learning" disgorge wave after wave of slobs destined for department stores and Starbucks, drones who have had the greatest portion of their creativity stamped out by programs and syllabi designed to reward off-the-cuff logic and rote memorization rather than original thinking. In an overeducated population, where every job seems to require that you have a degree in something, fewer and fewer people can afford *not* to go to college. Those who attend out of a real desire to accomplish something drown in the sea of students who are there for no reason other than that society — and the work force — seem to expect it of them.

But the universities are far more than classrooms filled with people that don't want to be there. A significant amount of learning and research goes on behind the scenes. Much of it involves students, yes, but a great deal more is conducted by recognized experts in their field. From cutting-edge science to archeological excavations to biblical and ancient studies, every field of knowledge can be found on the campuses of large universities. Discoveries are made regularly, the science is advancing humanity's understanding of both the past and future at a rate that boggles even the short-lived kine, let alone any of the Damned over a century old. Because it seems that so few people are successfully taught anything, few people — and few Kindred — recognize the major role that these universities play in the advancement of modern learning.



TENURE

Although most of the clans can realistically claim an interest in the higher learning and scientific breakthroughs these establishments provide, several specific bloodlines most frequently attempt to claim a city's colleges for their own.

Many young Kindred, those who still think of the Brujah as rabid brawlers, are stunned to learn that the so-called Rabble actually have a greater overall interest in the institutions of higher learning than almost any other clan. Only those who recognize the true need for change and understanding behind the Brujah attitudes really comprehend precisely why the clan would show such a supposedly uncharacteristic interest. Behind them, the Nosferatu and the Tremere also show substantial concern for the universities, as both clans have long since learned that this is the place to go when seeking certain forms of esoteric knowledge.

The Sabbat, intriguingly, has also shown a growing interest in universities of late. This usually takes the form of Lasombra activity, but the Tzimisce and even the Ventrue and Brujah *antitribu* have muscled in on the act. Primarily, this seems to be due the Black Hand's concern over the coming of the Antediluvians. The Noddists of the sect particularly

seek access to long lost tomes and relics, and universities often provide an "in" to those who conduct that sort of research. Those among the Camarilla who have learned of their rival sect's newfound interest in the halls of academia have a different theory. They believe that the Sabbat just wants to establish itself somewhere with a lot of kine, the better for mass Embracing when the time comes for one of their damned crusades. The Camarilla always assumes the worst when it comes to the Sabbat; but then again, they're probably not entirely wrong here, either....

The Followers of Set and the Assamites also show more than their share of interest in the larger universities. Where the Snakes are concerned, this is a double benefit. Not only do they have access to much the same information and research as the Sabbat, they also have an entire population of young and impressionable people, many of whom are just waiting for their chance to experiment with all sorts of forbidden fruit. Until recently, Assamite interest focused primarily on the school's more scientific departments, particularly chemistry and biology. With the reported shattering of the curse that prevented them from imbibing undead blood, the clan no longer feels the need to restrict itself to those fields. As the Western Kindred realize just how badly they've misjudged the

true makeup of the Assamite clan, they are also learning that the so-called "assassins" maintain an interest in many other realms of study.

CAMPUS SERVICES

It's easy to underestimate the value academic institutions hold. They don't bring in substantial amounts of money, at least not in such a way that it can conveniently be acquired by even the most heavily entrenched Kindred. They don't have a lot of pull with other, more "powerful" political entities. Most of them aren't even particularly prestigious any longer.

That being said, there are several good reasons for the Damned to retain an interest in the colleges and universities of their not-so-fair cities.

Hunting Grounds

While not sufficiently concentrated or reliable enough to be called a true herd, the average university campus provides an enormous range of feeding opportunities for thirsty Kindred. Although less populous at night than they are during daylight, such places still hold hundreds or even thousands of kine at even the darkest hours. Many evening classes run until after the sun has set, students stay up studying in the campus library, nighttime maintenance staff and security patrols wander the grounds on foot and in their Cushman golf carts.

Most importantly, dormitory living is a veritable godsend for hungry vampires. While feeding inside the dorms themselves is not usually a wise idea, there is always a sufficiency of students out late — partying, snatching a moment or three alone with a boy- or girlfriend, or just out walking and pondering the meaning of life — to satisfy even the most ravenous appetites.

If you plan to set up a haven at the local college campus or want to make it your regular feeding ground, make certain that your hunting techniques are refined to a razor's edge. Being detected while feeding or killing your chosen vessel are both even poorer ideas here than they are out in the "real" world. News and rumors spread quickly on campus, and just enough people of every stripe are probably enrolled that some of them will believe reports of a "vampire attack." By the same token, a murder on a college campus almost invariably draws more attention — from both law enforcement and the media — than a similar crime committed elsewhere. The relative youth and potential of the victim, combined with the immediate proximity of hundreds of other targets just like him, will function as a veritable beacon, summoning exactly the sorts of agencies and individuals that a wise Kindred wants nothing to do with (unless she's pulling their strings, of course). Feed well, then, but feed cautiously.

Specialists and Research

This is potentially the most useful attribute of universities, but only for the Damned who know how to separate the wheat from the chaff. At most universities, particularly those that are either state-supported or prestigious enough to be extremely well funded, numerous research projects can take place at any given time, many of which are going 24-7. Some of these are school-sponsored, while others may be little more than the private work of doctors, scientists and other recognized experts in their field who also happen to teach a class three days a week. Any department might have a project that patient undead patron might find rewarding.

Some of the greatest scientific breakthroughs in recent history have been made in the research labs of the universities. Research into disease and medication, superconductivity, enhanced computer processing — these, and hundreds of projects like them, occur constantly. A Kindred with business interests could make a fortune building on the discoveries made here. Why spend millions of dollars on R&D in your own corporation when you've got the dean's secretary in the science department at Cal Tech reporting his staff's findings to you almost as soon as they're written down? Who better to analyze that odd substance the Setites were messing around with than a research chemist — already in your debt, of course — at your local campus? Well, maybe the Tremere, but nobody sane wants to owe them a favor if they can help it.

Of course, universities aren't simply places to go for cutting edge scientific research. Powerful and profitable as such things may be, they really interest only the tiniest portion of the Kindred population. Old information, on the other hand, can be far more valuable in the right — or wrong — hands. These institutions contain a great deal of hidden knowledge, if only the seeker knows where to look. Old tomes, not to be found in school libraries but rather the private collections of the tenured historians and archeologists, can contain startling revelations for those who know how to read them. What is merely a local legend to the professor who owns the book might just be a factual report of an ancient Kindred when taken in its proper context.

Even better, many universities fund — or at least help to fund — archeological expeditions for their history and cultural departments. Even if the institution itself is doing no such thing, you can be sure that several current or former students in the field are remaining in contact with their professors, reporting their finds or even cooperating on joint ventures. As the faithful among the Kindred see the Final Nights approaching, and interest in Noddist philosophy and Cainite history rises to heights unseen in centuries, ancient writings and relics that evoke such topics, let

alone speak plainly on them, have become almost ridiculously valuable to segments of undead society. An alert Kindred (you've no doubt heard of noted scientist Douglas Netchurch) who is able to acquire such a find for himself can demand boons above and beyond the experience of any neonate in exchange for his prize.

Selection of Pawns and Progeny

As previously stated, the majority of students attending universities are there because society expects it of them, not out of any particular intelligence or desire to learn. Exceptions to my cynicism do occur, though, and when they can be found and properly cultivated, they're some of the greatest tools a Kindred could hope for.

Although few college students, if any, possess significant authority, remember that these are the lawyers, doctors, computer programmers, archeologists, CEOs and politicians of the future. By choosing your contacts from their professional infancy, gaining their loyalty through funding and favors, you've assured yourself of an ally who may be willing to direct his future authority as you desire without the need for heavy-handed tactics such as blackmail or Dominate. Incidentally, unless you've got something on them so severe that it would destroy any hope of their future professional career, don't bother trying to blackmail college students. Most of them don't have enough to lose to make them sufficiently pliable to your demands.

Universities are also prime choosing grounds for future childer, if the prospective sire is smart and willing to watch and wait for a few years to ensure that his selection matures fully into the promise he shows tonight. A potential progeny can be observed for years, through college, graduate school, and in his particular field of endeavor before a final choice is made. If the chosen one is mentored throughout this time, or granted aid and favor as described above, the sire-to-be is all but guaranteed (as much as anything to do with the Kindred can be guaranteed) a certain degree of loyalty, at least for a time.

ACQUIRING INFLUENCE

To determine how to take power in any given college or university, you first must decide precisely what you intend to do with said institution. If your concern is mostly one of hunting grounds or choice of pawns, there's little need for you to interfere directly with the school's administration at all. You'll probably have to request permission to hunt here from either the prince or whomever she's granted petty domain over the campus, since odds are pretty good somebody else has had the same thought you have. But as regards the mortal administration, you should have little enough to do. At

most, you may be forced to bribe or Dominate a clerk here and there for access to restricted student files while researching a potential Embrace.

If you're planning to take advantage of the school's experts and research, however, you have something of a larger task ahead of you. It's still not as difficult as suborning an entire corporate board or a congressman's staff, but you'll have to make some strategic choices.

Your best bet is to go for the specialists, researchers, doctors, scientists and project heads directly. These are the people who learn, firsthand, the information you want, or who find and catalog the relics you're hoping to obtain. True, operating person by person, rather than through the bureaucracy, means spreading your resources a bit thinner, but it's far more effective. While leverage over the dean of a particular department — or even the entire university — is certainly useful, you'll find that his authority is often limited. Deans and supervisors have the power to assign projects, or at least to encourage that research be conducted in a certain direction, but they often have less than full access to the results of that research. They know only what the specialists choose to report, and their authority really only extends to the door of the lab or, in the case of in-the-field studies such as archeological excavations, the border of the campus. Once the professor (or whoever) is in his element, there's little the dean can do to reign him in, other than to threaten to cut his funding. Furthermore, researchers are less likely to be open and honest about their findings with a demanding supervisor, so having an iron-fisted, despotic department head in your employ is counterproductive.

The single safest way to secure the cooperation of a specialist or researcher in a university setting, assuming you have the capital available, is through direct funding of his projects. Only in the wealthiest institutions, and even there only rarely, do the various project heads feel that they've truly received sufficient resources to complete their experiment, research, task, dig or whatnot in the way it should be completed. An offer of sufficient monies to allow them to go above and beyond what the administration has allowed — or, even better, to operate independently of the university auspices — is a prize that few self-styled field pioneers would refuse.

THE MEDIA

Perhaps the greatest (and saddest) indication of the state of civilization is the media. Newspapers, radio, television news broadcasts — these are intended to keep the public up to date and informed about the goings-on around their city, their nation and the world at large.

It doesn't work, of course. With each successive generation, fewer and fewer people know, or care, about anything outside their own little bubble. If it doesn't have a joystick or control pad attached to it, teens and young adults aren't interested in dealing with it. But that's okay; it doesn't matter that they're no longer allowing themselves to be educated by the media, because the media has long since ceased trying.

The purpose of the "news" is no longer to inform but to entertain an increasingly cynical and jaded populace. Accuracy has given way to alacrity, sense to sensationalism. Tonight's news sources are competing with blood-spattered movies and gore-filled video games for attention, and they'll do everything short of televising live rape to do it. Inane questions are hurled at the relatives of the victims of violent deaths so that the television screens can carry a live image of their grief-stricken faces for comfortable home consumption. 911 calls and black-box recordings are broadcast over and over again so that the stilted drones drooling in front of their TVs can briefly share in the experience of having an emotion. Reporters, taking refuge behind a First Amendment that was never intended to condone current standards of behavior, barge in anywhere, say anything, do whatever it takes for a story. Accusations are made on insufficient information, forever ruining the careers, even the lives, of public figures. Sensitive secrets are exposed on national broadcasts and widespread newspapers, causing untold damage to ongoing police investigations, government projects and corporate product development.

It is, in short, a world of half-lies and false images, a world where information is twisted, corrupted, even manufactured, rather than actually and simply reported. It is a world that the Kindred have slipped into with all the comfort of a man coming home and pulling on his favorite sweatshirt, and it's a perfect fit.

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

In tonight's world of 20-second sound bites and voyeuristic infotainment, the media holds more power than ever. At the whim of the press, politicians rise and fall, normal people become celebrities (and vice versa) and corporations are dragged through the mud before the public eye. Even the government relies on media investigations to launch their own probes into various wrongdoings.

Some nations rely on the media more than others, of course. It's said that, back during the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein watched CNN to determine where his SCUD missiles had landed. Those who disseminate the information may not precisely control the world, but they certainly wield a good bit of leverage.

STOP THE PRESSES!

It is impossible to say that any one clan holds more influence in the media than any other. This, more than anything else, is a universal constant, one that crosses clan and even sect lines. Nearly everybody, from the stodgiest Ventrue to the wildest Gangrel, understands the vital necessity of influencing the public's single greatest source of information. Even the leadership of the Sabbat, which would never admit to such a thing outright, understands the need to keep their existence out of the public eye, and that means authority over the omnipresent press. Only the most unbalanced Malkavian or Black Hand neonate could fail to understand the necessity of keeping this particular Pandora's box nailed well and truly shut.

As far as how that power is attained, that's something else altogether. The Ventrue, Lasombra, Toreador and other so-called "social" clans tend to direct the media when they can from the top down, selecting company executives, station managers and editors as their pawns, trusting that these authority figures have the ability to keep their underlings silent. The more hands-on approach, often taken by the Brujah and Nosferatu, is to deal directly with the reporters and anchors, those who investigate and relay the news firsthand. Whether one technique is particularly more or less effective than the other is difficult to determine, but the two together have been adequately successful in keeping the Masquerade intact.

A warning to those neonates who would seek to build up their own authority over the press: The powers that be are watching you. Closely. Media influence is vital to Kindred survival, and the local authorities, be they prince or archbishop, are not going to stand for any bungling in this area. Prove your ability and your willingness to wield your newfound power for the good of your fellows, or you're going to be replaced quickly.

Masquerade Preservation

This is the purpose that most of the Damned think of when they consider Kindred influence over the media, and while other uses should hardly be dismissed out of hand, this one qualifies as the most important. The undead are creatures of blood and violence and death. Princes and primogen can make what rules they want, sheriffs and scourges can dole out horrendous punishments by the score until Gehenna comes, and it will make no difference. On any given night, regardless of circumstances, somewhere a Kindred is breaking the Masquerade. As often as not, given the nature of

Kindred frenzies, no living witnesses to these particular breaches remain. When someone does survive, it is those Kindred who pull the strings of the press to whom the other Damned turn.

Sometimes, when the violation is a small one, or if it's been caught sufficiently early on, it's enough to know which particular reporter is covering the story of the "strange murders" or "unusually powerful suspect, probably on PCP." If your sphere of influence already includes this particular individual, it should be fairly simple for you to have the story altered or dropped completely. If not — if you have enough power to locate and identify the reporter but not enough to order her about — you can't be terribly subtle, since you won't likely have time to acquire any blackmail-worthy information or put together a suitable bribe. In these cases, Dominate — or, failing that, even something as crude as an unfortunate "accident" — may be your only alternative.

In other instances, access to the reporter in question simply isn't sufficient. If the breach created a stir, or if enough people know about it already, you have to go higher. In these instances, editors and executives are your best bet. These people have the authority to shut down any story their paper, television station or whatever might run — or even better than killing it, to present it with altered facts, providing a reasonable explanation for what may, at first, have seemed unnatural.

If you're the Kindred responsible for all this — or at least one of said Kindred, since the odds are you won't hold sway over every form of media in your city — you're truly balancing on a tightrope. The responsibility you've assumed is enormous. On your shoulders falls the preservation of the Masquerade, at least on a local level, and other Kindred are going to be unforgiving of even the tiniest lapse on your part. Screw up once, let even a single inappropriate story leak through, and the odds are you won't get a second opportunity. This is especially true in Camarilla cities near Sabbat strongholds. The elders know full well that the Sabbat's tactics sometimes include violations of the Masquerade, and they need to know that the Kindred lurking in the papers and TV stations can manage the necessary damage control, leaving them free to counter the crusade on other fronts.

But for many intrepid Cainites, the risks are worth it. Though you won't be able to demand favors per se for protecting the Masquerade, the elders aren't blind to the fact that you're an essential cog in the Kindred machine. They're likely to support you more than they would most young Licks, putting in a good word here or even granting a small boon there. It's a less direct form of leverage than most, but still one that can be put to excellent use by the skilled and ambitious.

Directing the Flow of Information

Of course, protecting the Masquerade is hardly the only reason for covering up or killing a story. Corporations, politicians, organized criminals and the city's rich and powerful are all perfectly viable subjects for investigation by the press, and every last one of them has skeletons in the closet — if not, in some cases, sprawled about the living room — that they'd rather not have revealed to the public. A Kindred — or, for that matter, any individual at all — who has the power to prevent those stories from reaching the papers or the networks is going to find a great many powerful people owing him favors. If you're particularly interested in acquiring these favors quickly — perhaps you're trying to accumulate influence in other interests, and the media is just your first step — you have no reason not to use your connections in the press to launch those investigations in the first place, before you ride in and offer to stop those selfsame investigations. Just make sure that the subjects never have the opportunity to learn that you put them in the very position you helped hoist them out of. People tend to look askance at being manipulated, and most of them aren't going to feel particularly obligated to you at that point.

This technique works just as well for other Kindred as it does for mortals. If the corporation that's about to have its safety practices (or lack thereof) trumpeted to the world belongs to, say, some vain Toreador, you can demand a much larger favor for squashing the story than the company's mortal CEO could ever offer.

This is as far as many Kindred think when it comes to the media and the information it manages. The truth is, you can do far more than simply killing stories that someone doesn't want to see in print. Investigations can be launched and then allowed to proceed. If the gentleman running for senator in your state happens to be an outspoken critic of a corporation in which you're involved, a probe into improper conduct among his staff, or an interview with his teenage daughter alleging child abuse, may be just the tools you need to derail his campaign. A company that has been practically destroyed by a story alleging contamination of the drinking water in a nearby community is ripe for new management.

Sometimes, you may find yourself succumbing to the temptation to create an entire story from whole cloth, to lie about a given public figure or CEO in order to bring them down and replace them with someone more malleable. This is rarely a good idea. Charges of slander and libel can land a paper or news station in court at the drop of a hat, and the courts take such things very seriously. Unless you can also manufacture enough evidence to convince the courts that you're correct, or at least enough to prove that your news agency was

misinformed rather than dishonest, you're far safer simply collecting secrets instead of making them up. Odds are, the person you're having investigated has something real to hide anyway.

Access

As much as many politicians and businessmen may hate the press, the so-called Fifth Estate has the ability to go places few other people can go. Politicians have to make public statements, celebrities must have their photo ops, and so forth. At every major police investigation or crime scene, any time a movie star is arrested on drug charges for the fourth time, anywhere a politician fumbles a line of his speech or scratches his ass in public, you'll find a reporter.

This affords you a substantial amount of opportunity to go wherever you feel the need to go, and to see whomever you need to see. Need a private meeting with the CEO of Crichton-Lawler or KSR Manufacturing to discuss an exchange of favors? Maybe you've been looking for the opportunity to start feeding just a tiny bit of vitae to one of the richest socialites in the state. An arranged interview with the press, especially if you're able to imply that you've got something on them that may just hit the papers without their side of the story if they refuse to see you, can open a great many doors for you.

ACQUIRING INFLUENCE

It is unsurprisingly difficult to gain any sort of true power over the media, even in a localized arena. This isn't because reporters, anchormen or editors are any more difficult to sway than other people. They can be blackmailed, bribed or trapped in a web of favors and debts as easily as anyone else. No, the problems arise in suborning enough people in enough different positions to get the job done.

In a corporate setting, for instance, it is sometimes sufficient that you hold sway over a board member or department head. You give the orders through your contact, they trickle down to the ranks below, and that's the end of the matter. Things aren't so simple when it comes to matters of the media. You may influence the executives of a television station or the editor-in-chief of a newspaper, and you'll be able to reassign reporters and cut stories. But in dealing with the press, you are inherently dealing in matters dangerous to your interests and outside your complete control. True, your editor may have squashed that story that would have drawn the Justice Department's attentions to the activities of your law firm, but the reporter who investigated the complaints still knows the truth, even if she can't (at the moment) put it in the paper. Your pet executive at KHNW news may have made the video of that damn frenzied Gangrel from the other night disappear, but the crew who took

the pictures and witnessed the Outlander kill three civilians and a cop still know what they saw. They're probably not going to buy any official story about amphetamines and body armor, not when they're pretty sure they saw fangs and claws.

Is suborning the reporters directly the answer? It would seem to be a better solution, directing those who actually investigate and report the news rather than those who simply decide if it reaches the public. The problem here, of course, is one of numbers. Given the massive number of reporters, cameramen and the like employed by even a modest news agency, it would be impossible for any single individual, Kindred or otherwise, to hope to hold the reins of all of them. And new people are hired all the time as old reporters retire and the agencies grow, or as freelance assignments require more reporters than the full-time payroll can support.

Your best bet, clearly, is a combination of the two. Bringing a handful of reporters — preferably those with the most seniority, or at least the best reputations — into your debt will enable you to catch a great deal of information before it ever reaches the ears of the people in charge, allowing you to do with it as you will. An executive, editor or other high authority is a must, however, so that you retain the ability to silence any dangerous stories that make it past your first line of defense.

A similar issue, albeit on a larger scale, is the question of whether you should seek to influence the local news agencies or the national wire services. It's much the same thing as choosing between the reporters and the executives. The local papers and television stations are the ones who first receive the news, and if you can regulate the information at the source, that's always a preferable option. Furthermore, while every city has its news agencies and papers, the odds of you being located anywhere near the offices of the wire services are fairly remote.

If you can make any headway into the wire services, though, you'll find they give you a much more far-reaching power than any local entity ever could. It is these services that distribute stories across the nation, paper to paper, network to network, city to city. In a worst-case scenario, even if the information you want buried or modified has already been disseminated to the press on a local level, influence in the wire services can at least prevent the damage from quickly spreading to other regions. Of course, in this era of instant communications, it's impossible to completely stop information from spreading, but keeping the wire services quiet on a given topic can buy you a substantial amount of time for other forms of damage control.



ORGANIZED RELIGION

A single force has shaped human history, steered and directed it in ways that not even the most subtle, most influential Kindred could imagine. Nations have risen up and been cast down, wars have been waged, and countless oceans of blood have been spilled in its name. Religion. The Church. God.

If God exists, it certainly seems as though He's all but abandoned the world. As the Final Nights loom large, as the evil depredations of the children of Caine (not to mention the other supernaturals) go unchecked, as mortals slide ever nearer the abyss, there are those who maintain that the Creator has turned His back on His creation.

And yet the churches, temples, synagogues and mosques remain full, in some cases even crowded. Although a smaller proportion of the kine attend such institutions now than they have in the past, the dangerous swelling of the earth's population guarantees that the numbers remain high, even as the percentages drop. True faith, though rare in the extreme, is still a most potent weapon against the Kindred, and it seems that such power must surely come from somewhere. And where, then, do the Kindred themselves come from, if God does not exist? If there was no Creator, no Caine, no curse, what does that leave?

But whatever the "truth" may be in the spiritual sense, or whether or not such a thing even exists, only

the most naïve would doubt that faith is a powerful tool in more earthly spheres. Elder Kindred still remember the nights of the Inquisition and the domination of Rome. To them, religion is still a most powerful institution, and they are not entirely wrong. Although they may not now have the power they once claimed, the various faiths still have substantial pull on society. Wars are still waged over words and beliefs, blood still spilled in a futile attempt to determine how many chapters of the book should be considered Truth.

Yes, religion is still very much a part of the modern world, and very much a part of the collective human psyche. For the Kindred who can attain any degree of influence in this particular domain, the rewards can be great indeed — but the risks are commensurately high. In most political arenas, most elements of kine society or business, a misstep can result in a neonate's losing a substantial amount of power and prestige. When dealing with the various houses of God, such a misstep might prove lethal.

MEN OF THE CLOTH

Power over religious institutions is a very personal thing, and the question of whether a Kindred can be considered to influence "the Church" or any other large religious group simply by influencing one of its priests is a debatable one. For a variety of reasons, Kindred rarely

QUESTIONS OF FAITH

The scope of this particular segment is narrow in the extreme. The focus here is almost entirely on the Judeo-Christian religions, and even more so on the Catholic Church in particular. This is not intended to convey any disrespect or disparagement to other faiths. The truth is, most Kindred focus on these particular religions for multiple reasons.

First, it is these faiths from which the vampires' own creation myth arises. True, a substantial number of Kindred don't believe in the story of Caine, just as there are many kine who don't believe in God, or Adam and Eve. But those who have accepted the tale of the first murderer as gospel truth find it exceedingly difficult not to accept the rest of the story along with it.

Secondly, Christianity, in all its varied forms, is the dominant religion in the areas from which most modern Kindred hail. The Camarilla and the Sabbat have spread throughout a substantial portion of the world, but their largest concentrations remain in Europe and the Americas, two largely Christian regions. For a substantial majority of neonates, Christianity is the religious default, the belief system they automatically think of first when the topic arises.

Then there is the overwhelming fact that it is Christianity — specifically Roman Catholicism — that has had the largest impact on Cainite history. The Inquisition is, in many respects, the greatest defining factor in the development of Kindred society as it stands tonight, and there is no separating the horrors of those nights of fire from the faith that spawned them. For many Kindred, particularly the old ones, any threat posed by organized religions in general is summed up and represented by the Catholic Church specifically.

Finally, consider that in the world of the Kindred, few religions have the level of power and influence as the various sects of Christianity. Buddhists and Hindus, for instance, make up an enormous portion of the world population, but these religions are focused in Asia and its surroundings, which are regions where the Kindred can claim little dominance. Much of the Middle East practices Islam, but this, too, is an area outside the sphere of operations of most of the Kindred clans (except the Assamites and the Followers of Set, but they don't tend to share, and many of the Muslim faithful among the Assamites have fled the Middle East anyway). All these faiths can be found in Europe and the Americas, along with the various other denominations of Christianity, Judaism, and, to a lesser extent, Wicca and other pagan religions, and uncountable others — but these simply don't hold the influence over society that the Christian religion does.

This is not to say that there are no Kindred involved in these other religions, nor that your character can't attempt to carve a niche for himself among the local Taoists or Animists or Baha'i or any other group he might like to approach. But as a generalization, Kindred prefer influence over the Christian denominations to most of the others, and this, then, is where this chapter must focus.

encompass anyone of greater than low (or at most, mid-level) rank in the clergy within their sphere of influence (see below). Thus, any authority the Kindred may have in these religious institutions tends, on average, to be restricted to the regional or even local level.

All this makes it exceedingly difficult to quantify Kindred intervention in religious affairs by clan, but the astute can draw a few generalities. The first is that the Lasombra may or may not actually possess the greatest "authority" in the Catholic Church, but they certainly count among their members the greatest number of actual Cainite priests and other religious figures (such as the late and not-terribly lamented Ambrosio Luis Monçada). Secondly, it is the Ventrue and, oddly enough, the Malkavians, at least among the Camarilla clans, who profess the greatest interest in matters of religious authority. For the Ventrue, this is as much a matter of safety as anything else; they seek to command a voice of reason inside the institution that so nearly

destroyed the Kindred as a whole centuries ago. As for the Malkavians, well, their reasons are as inscrutable as ever, though many suggest an interest in prophecy, philosophy and eschatology unmatched in any other modern venue.

Just for the sake of completeness, it should be pointed out, though it's fairly obvious, that the Assamites tend to hold the greatest influence in the Islamic portions of the world. This is changing, however, as a faction of separatist Assamites departs the Middle East. As far as Judaism goes, no clan or group of clans shows interest in the religion as a whole, though the Tremere have proven themselves more than mildly curious regarding the mystical practices of Kabbalah.

MATTERS OF FAITH

Although the nights when the Church openly vied for supremacy with mortal nobility for the entire Western world are long gone, it is a foolish Kindred

indeed who underestimates the social and personal power that faiths and their regimented institutions still hold in the modern era. For many people, religion is still a deeply personal thing, and it impacts them in greater ways than any other facet of life. Religious institutions and places of worship showcase people at their best, and at their worst, and the ambitious neonate can take advantage of both.

Herd

As with any social institution in which large numbers of people gather, churches and their ilk make convenient if hazardous places where a subtle Kindred can take her sustenance. Mortals tend to feel safe in the House of God; their guard is down, their minds less alert than they otherwise might be.

Of course, for a variety of reasons (too many witnesses and the possible lingering aura of years or decades of true faith are the two most obvious), you most likely won't be doing your hunting inside the church (or temple, or shrine) itself. But access to church plans and schedules tell you all you need to know about organized activities, projects, gatherings and other such events that guarantee the presence of a number of people in a specific area.

And if you're truly lucky, you might just find a churchgoer ready to believe the old "I'm an angel of the Lord" routine, willing to let you feed from them regularly. Okay, so it's not especially likely, but anything's possible in these nights of desperate faith.

This particular meal comes with its own risks, though. As rare as true faith may be in the dawning of the 21st century, don't forget that you're choosing to dabble in the area that is most likely to attract those few pious individuals who possess such a gift. Observe your prey even more carefully under these circumstances than you normally would. No sense in burning your mouth on a morsel that's too hot for you.

Blackmail

Confession may be good for the soul, but it ain't so hot for the old wallet. While few religions—or even Christian denominations—have the same sort of formalized system of confessions as the Catholic Church, every sort of clergy, from pastors to rabbis, serves as a mentor and advisor to his congregation. People will tell their minister things they'd never speak of to another soul except possibly a highly paid and secular therapist: things admitted in confidence, things of which an unscrupulous Kindred—and is there any other kind?—can make full use.

This is not to imply that you ought to be sneaking into the confessional of the neighborhood church and doling out the Hail Marys. Here, more than almost anywhere else, you need a proxy, someone to do your dirty work and who can be trusted more or less.



The information your crooked priest brings you isn't going to prove useful all the time. While it may be fascinating, in a voyeuristic, soap-opera sense, to learn who's been doing what behind whose back, the neighborhood gossip isn't going to get you very far in your quest for power and influence. Occasionally, though, the confession comes from someone important. Maybe it's a community leader, or the founder and CEO of a young but highly successful software firm, or even a career criminal confessing out of some guilty sense of religious duty. Religion draws people from all walks of life, and it can provide a doorway into the upper echelons of any and every other sphere of kine society.

More than a bit of caution is demanded, though, if you're going to keep this up very long. Your targets can't ever be permitted to realize that it was their priest who sold them out. If your pet clergyman loses the trust of his flock, if people cease going to him with their problems and admissions of guilt, he becomes as useless to you as if he'd simply stepped in front of a speeding bus. Subtlety is a wise idea in most circumstances, but here especially you want to wield the leverage you've been handed like a scalpel, not a sledgehammer.

Missions and Missionaries

To many of the old Kindred, these terms still conjure up images of sunburned men in heavy robes, fervent with an unquenchable desire to convert the heathen by fire and blade. The neonates know, however, that though such techniques have fallen by the wayside, the concept of the mission is still very much alive. A great many religious organizations of varied denominations make regular pilgrimages to various nations and other spots on the globe, all in the name of humanitarian aid and spreading the word — though no longer the sword — of God. A congregation in Austin, Texas, might decide to take a week or two and travel to Mexico, where they might provide what food and medicine and aid they can to people living on the equivalent of mere pennies a day. A coalition of churches from the Appalachians might set up a station in Rwanda, where they provide not only medical supplies but also education for the families displaced by years of genocidal warfare.

Operations just like these are underway all the time, sponsored and supported by churches and religious groups that feel the need to share what they've been blessed with. They can travel unimpeded almost anywhere, for few governments would risk the backlash of world opinion they would suffer by denying entry to such goodwill missions, and even fewer would question the purposes and intentions of such groups.

For the Kindred, this makes such missionary endeavors the perfect cover for all sorts of smuggling and clandestine movements. Some of the few Kindred to delve into the depths of the Cathayan domains have delivered their agents there under cover of just such an undertaking. The Damned of all clans have smuggled every sort of contraband, from the traditional (such as drugs or knockoff merchandise) to the mystical (such as components for Thaumaturgical rituals or fragments of the *Book of Nod*). Kindred have even been known to have themselves smuggled by pawns carefully placed within such groups, should they feel the need to leave their current domains without anyone being the wiser. In fact, more than one group of Camarilla agents has been covertly inserted into the Mexican Sabbat territories in this manner.

Care must still be taken when having your missionaries carry contraband materials for you. Such people are not exempt from the requirements and procedures of customs officials on either side of any border. Still, because these missionaries are accepted, if not truly welcomed, nearly anywhere, the potential inherent in such an operation should be apparent to even the youngest neonate.

Hunters

While it would be utterly incorrect to claim that every witch-hunter or hunter's organization was attached to a religious establishment, the truth remains that more such individuals and groups are affiliated with the Church than with any other single societal entity in the world. Go up high enough in the hierarchy of any typical ecclesiastic institution and you can be fairly certain that, somewhere among this gathering of clergy, someone or other has at least some connections with a hunter or hunters.

Why is this a good thing?

Hunters are an unfortunate fact of unlife for the Kindred, proof that all secrets, even those as fanatically protected as the Masquerade, have a way of leaking out. And while it's true that the average kine isn't going to pose too much of a threat to even a rank fledgling, any neonate who foolishly dismisses the threat that hunters pose isn't likely to make it to ancilla.

The Church, then, can function as your eyes and ears in their world, an early warning system to alert you to the coming of— well, not all such dangerous mortals who might visit your city, but at least a great many of them. If you can determine which of the local priests or other clergy work with or even know of these hunters, your own contacts can keep their ears to the ground, as it were.

For the more daring Kindred, it may even be possible to direct those hunters on a (very!) occasional basis. A hint dropped through proper channels, one designed to eventually reach the priest upon whom you've had your eye, can set his hunter allies moving where you want them. If that hint happens to include the address your primary rival's haven, and a list of her recent atrocities, well, the old harriidan had it coming, didn't she?

It shouldn't require mention, but this is a dangerous situation for a Kindred to place herself in. Research and investigate before approaching anyone; be certain that the priest you're suborning to keep watch on the local hunters' contact isn't in fact that contact himself. Such people are far more difficult to control than your average clergyman, and he may just play along with you long enough to call in his friends. Even if you've managed to snag just the right priest, one who can be influenced and also has a good working relationship with the hunters' contact, you need to couch your queries in the most subtle terms. Hunters, and those who work with them, are a viciously paranoid lot, sometimes more so than the Kindred themselves, and many of them are the sort to murder a fellow priest just on suspicion of working with the enemy. It would be a shame to go through all the trouble of suborning a priest only to have your new contact snatched from you because he was too careless in his questioning.

As far as using the hunters themselves, save them for a truly special occasion. Directing their activities by dropping hints about your rivals is the Kindred equivalent of Russian Roulette. No matter how lucky you may be, if you do it too often it will get you destroyed. Try this technique more than once in a blue moon, and sooner or later they're going to start questioning your clerical agent's source of information. The truth will surface.

ACQUIRING INFLUENCE

Religious institutions in general, and the Catholic Church in particular, are paradoxically both the easiest and the hardest institutions in which to build your character's influence. If all you're really trying to do is acquire some measure of sway over the local church on the corner, the task ahead of you is fairly simple. While a few priests (or rabbis, or ministers, or whatever) possess true faith, the majority of them are no more difficult to deal with than normal people. Most clergymen are just as susceptible to blackmail, bribing, extortion or more direct forms of control (blood bond, Dominate, etc.) as the next mortal. A bit of covert observation, maybe a touch of research, and you've got the priest — and

therefore his church, if you've chosen your cleric well — under your thumb.

For most Kindred, this is sufficient. Esteem by a single church grants you all the advantages mentioned above, from blood and blackmail to missions and possibly a line on local witch-hunters.

But some Licks want more. They want influence over the Church as an institution. They want a hand in Church policies and decisions, a position from which they can use the power of Rome (or whatever faith they've chosen) to sway society itself.

This degree of authority is almost impossible for a Kindred to attain. The first and simplest barrier to neonate acquisition is that those few Kindred who already hold such positions are almost invariably many times older than their upstart rivals, and they're not going to give up easily. The Church, at its core, is not a particularly innovative institution, and that means that all the advantages a young Kindred might gain through his knowledge of modern technology and procedures isn't going to help him in this particular battle. If you're taking on the elders of the Church, you're probably going to have to face them on their own terms.

Another obstacle, equally lethal, comes from the hand of God Himself, or at least His servants' belief in Him. True faith is actually more common at the lowest levels of the hierarchy. Most local priests haven't had their faith wrung out of them by the bureaucracy and temporal authority the way many of their superiors have unless you're dealing with truly pious and powerful figures like the Pope. Nevertheless, at street level, you're dealing with a single priest, perhaps two or three. As you approach those who hold regional or national authority, you are continually exposing yourself to people and situations in which you are almost guaranteed to run into those who possess a faith strong enough to do you harm, or at the very least to flush you out and expose you.

Finally, one must consider that no one person, excepting figures such as the Pope, really has all that much authority over the doings of an entire religion. Even if you were capable of suborning a cardinal or an archbishop (and we're not talking about the Sabbath here), what would you have them do? The policies they can effect on their own are relatively limited in scope and size, and any suggestions they make that are bizarre or out of character are not going to go unnoticed by the others in power.

No, when it comes to influence in matters and agencies of faith, young Kindred would be wise to limit their aspirations. Too much ambition will be far more trouble than it's worth.



PSYCHOLOGY, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL WORK

Although mortals have been trying to understand and quantify aspects of their own behavior since time began, the science of psychology in the modern sense of the word began in the earliest years of the 20th century with Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic theory. In Kindred terms, this makes psychology an infant science, one that is dismissed by many elders as incomprehensible or even superstitious claptrap, despite the fact that they've been making use of similar techniques for uncounted centuries in their efforts to understand and thus anticipate or exploit their rivals. True, psychoanalysis is more widely accepted and understood among the ancients than, say, C+ programming, chaos theory or quantum physics. Nevertheless, this is one field in which modern neonates definitely hold the home-field advantage.

Despite what many Kindred (and for that matter, many kine) believe, psychology is far more than the hackneyed man sitting beside a black leather couch saying, "Tell me about your mother." While therapy may be the branch of science the public most often considers, it makes up only a portion of this field of study

and treatment. Across the world, researchers perform studies and experiments to increase humanity's understanding of the ways in which the human mind functions. Social workers toil in hospitals and clinics, tending to the mental and emotional scars left by illness and injury — wounds that often linger far longer than any physical malady. The FBI and other law-enforcement agencies around the world study psychological profiles of serial killers on the grounds that an understanding of those who have come before will lead to quicker capture of those yet to come.

At its heart, whether it be through research or therapy, experimentation or medication, the ultimate purpose of psychology is to understand the human mind at its deepest intellectual and emotional levels and, understanding it, to alter and direct the reactions and thought patterns that stem from it. Psychology, boiled down to its most fundamental level, is about one thing and one thing only: Forecast of human behavior.

It is a goal that the Kindred cannot help but associate with. Perhaps the most startling thing about Kindred influence and interference in the psychological fields is not that such involvement has been increasing in recent nights, but that there wasn't a lot more of it to begin with.

THE DOCTOR IS IN

As Kindred involvement in psychology is only now becoming a widespread phenomenon, it is difficult to draw many supportable conclusions regarding which clan or clans are likely to dominate the field. Nearly every bloodline has members who can claim some sort of interest or expertise in this area, but few have taken it upon themselves in sufficient numbers to indicate a clanwide trend.

That said, a handful of clans have shown a sufficient interest in the science to suggest that, even if they don't wind up with the greatest degree of influence, they have at the least a quantifiable interest in the topic.

It would be a laughable assertion to claim that the Malkavians do much of anything "as a clan." Despite their fractiousness, a startling proportion of the Damned involved in psychology are indeed Lunatics. Then again, considering their fascination with their own insanity (well, among those who recognize it, anyway), as well as their propensity for driving over the brink those prospective childer who haven't quite made it on their own yet, perhaps the numbers aren't so surprising after all. The Warlocks also have more than a passing interest in this arena, though their focus tends to be more on the paranormal end of the spectrum. More than one Tremere was Embraced after she scored abnormally highly in parapsychological experiments.

The other clan that appears to show more than its share of interest in the field is the Ventrue. It is, perhaps, not unexpected that the Blue Bloods would display a fascination with a science that not only involves the manipulation of people's thoughts, ideas and feelings, but also draws patients who are at their most vulnerable. Many Ventrue have taken to psychology with a passion, showing not only a knack for the science but also a malicious glee over what they can accomplish that is almost maniacal in its intensity.

FREE ASSOCIATION

No other discipline of modern science or medicine is so directly suited to the gathering of secrets and subtle manipulations of the psyche than psychology. The most perverse Tzimisce cannot shape the body into as many twisted forms as the student of psychology can shape the mind. The most inconspicuous Nosferatu cannot gather personal secrets and shames as easily as the professional therapist who finds such things laid bare before her. If the elders truly comprehended the things they could accomplish with this "soft" science, they wouldn't hesitate to learn more

about it. If you're reading this, you're probably young enough to understand.

Individual Influence and Shaping of Pawns

Psychology is a science devoted to the shaping of thought, action and reaction. In other words, it is the alteration of personality itself. Especially when dealing with therapy, but even in other circumstances such as among test subjects or support groups, the people with whom the psychologist deals are at their most vulnerable. Their defenses are down, their innermost thoughts and feelings stated plainly, if not at first, then gradually over the course of the therapeutic process. Fortunately for those in such circumstances, most therapists are actually interested in helping their patients, not so much healing them as encouraging them to heal themselves.

But for a therapist less interested in the beneficial aspects of the science, for a Kindred or the agent of a Kindred, this is the perfect opportunity to mold the individual into someone far more responsive to the Kindred's needs — someone who may be a far cry from the person he used to be. There are limits to what you can accomplish with this, certain mental and emotional problems better suited to this sort of manipulation than others. A woman seeing her therapist once a week for mild depression is probably not a viable candidate for any substantial personality changes (though increasing her depression to a crippling level, should you feel the need to do such a thing, wouldn't likely prove too difficult). A man on the verge of being committed because he's been hearing voices, however, is a prime subject. Once he's been convinced that the voices are real, that they should indeed be obeyed, planting hints and suggestions as to what those voices are saying is simplicity itself.

The mind is an infinitely malleable thing, easier to sculpt when it's either quite young or already seriously disturbed (or both), but anyone can be guided toward specific behaviors. Hatreds and phobias can gestate, either cultivated to rise quickly to the surface or left to germinate and grow in their own time. Many patients come to rely on their therapists without being nudged in that direction. Properly guided by someone with sufficient training in psychology, this can grow into an obsessive loyalty. When backed up further with the psychologically active gifts of the Kindred, these techniques are practically infallible. Consider the mental suggestion of the Ventrue, the artificial emotional responses engendered by the Toreador and the outright psychological sledgehammers wielded by the Malkavians.

In fact, one of the simplest and yet most useful services a trained psychologist can perform for the

Kindred is to justify to a patient the strange behaviors she undertook while under the influence of such powers. It is often dangerous to use Dominate on an individual, for example, because she'll likely recall her strange behavior afterward and wonder why she acted that way. If her therapist can explain the event away in psychological terms — repressed emotions surfacing from the subconscious in times of stress or the like — the subject is far less likely to ever consider that there may have actually been an outside catalyst for her behavior.

Anyone, even a fast-food restaurant manager or a housewife, can be made into a useful tool, but these aren't the true prizes awaiting an ambitious neonate. There are still a substantial number of powerful, useful people lying on a couch in a doctor's office twice a week. The tripartite ruling class of big business, politics and high society is a heavily stressful environment, and more than a small portion of the men and women of the upper crust find themselves in need of counseling. If you or those working for you can acquire such people as patients, it may be possible for you to gain an advantage in these other arenas without ever having to exchange a single favor or take a single risk.

This is not a quick or easy process. You're not going to be able to grab some random person off the street with a bipolar or mild obsessive-compulsive disorder and turn him into your faithful slave ready to kill or die at your command. But over the course of months or even years, patients can be gradually brought around to your preferred way of thinking, implanted with whatever feelings or beliefs you might desire to give them. Remember the old joke about women dating younger men that says, "If you can't find a good man, raise one."

Blackmail

Sometimes you don't have the time, the inclination or even the need to shape a patient in therapy. Sometimes, the direct ways and the old techniques are still the best. Therapists, much like priests but even more so, are told things in confidence that would never be admitted to another living soul. Safe and secure in their knowledge of doctor-patient confidentiality, patients reveal the darkest moments of their lives and the most damning sins on their souls.

In short, they play directly into the hands of a Kindred with exploitation on his mind. Not every patient in therapy is worth blackmailing, and not all those who are will have a secret dirty enough to provide a hold on them. Then again, these are the modern nights. Odds are pretty high than any CEO, lawyer, politician, stock market wizard or other

moderately important or powerful person is going to have something to hide. True, extorting your way into authority may not be quite as stable as putting a kine in place who's truly loyal to you after years of subtle conditioning, but it's a time-honored technique that's proven effective more often than not in the mortal world as well as Kindred society.

With therapists, as with priests in the confessional, you must conceal the source of your information. Violations of confidentiality are not only sufficient to cost a therapist her license to practice, they invite all manner of law suits and civil penalties. This applies to any sort of therapeutic counselor, be they psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, chemical dependency counselor or anything else. Something else to bear in mind: The confidentiality statutes apply even after a patient has died. If you intend to make use of secrets and information obtained for you in this manner, it is important that you find a way to do so that does not place the therapist herself at risk. Unless, of course, you're finished with that particular therapist.

Early Detection of Exceptional/Paranormal Abilities

While the field of parapsychology is treated with something less than respect by the psychological community at large, the fact remains that it is a recognized (or at least quasi-recognized) branch of the science. At universities, medical establishments and government facilities around the world, tests are conducted on promising subjects, searching for any sign of extrasensory or telepathic ability. From the latest in EKG and CAT scans to tricks as old and simple as guessing what pictures are on the backs of cards, anything and everything imaginable is used to detect even the faintest inkling of paranormal potential.

Even in the modern nights, when certain marginalized portions of society are inclined to believe in such things, these tests prove to be utter failures a vast majority of the time. It would be safe, in fact, to say that less than one percent of these tests turn up any positive results at all. Less than one percent of those show anything more than a minor rise in the success rate that could be blind chance rather than ESP.

As always, quite a number of individuals among the Kindred, as well as a few entire clans (the Tremere and the Malkavians come most readily to mind), prefer to keep a close watch on these experiments and projects. They perch, ready to swoop in that one time in a thousand that a true paranormal ability is detected and confirmed. If you've already achieved a measure of authority in such a program, you can sometimes get there first, before the elders have the chance to react.

Chances are pretty good that you're not going to be able to make full use of this prodigy's abilities. Even if you're a member of one of those clans that has a widespread interest in such individuals, you probably don't have the resources at hand to study the phenomenon yourself. Simply Embracing or even blood bonding the individual is rarely a wise idea, even if you've already got permission to create progeny. You've got precious little idea of what that might do to the abilities you covet. Your best bet is to use the talented mortal as a bargaining chip, trading information on him to your elders (or other interested parties) in exchange for a boon. You'll probably find someone who owes you a favor to be more useful than a child who always wins at poker.

Of course, all this assumes that such psychic phenomena isn't so much bullshit, like the proverbial free lunch or vampires.

Access to Controlled Substances

Many people, Kindred and kine alike, aren't fully clear on the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist. While there are other distinctions, one of the primary ones is simply this: The psychiatrist is a medical doctor, whereas the psychologist is not. This means that psychiatrists can prescribe, and have access to, all sorts of drugs and medications. Beyond any consideration of street value, which can be fairly high for the right substance, these drugs can also be of use in the moderation of behavior — that is, after all, what they're designed to do.

If you don't have access to someone with a psychiatric license, you may be able to produce the same results with a social worker. Although not trained or authorized to prescribe medications, many social workers work in clinics or hospitals, where it requires precious little effort to get their hands on such things, in the form of samples if nothing else. In fact, as social workers have access to nearly every part of a hospital or clinic in which they work, such individuals may be useful for far more than acquiring drugs. One of them might, in fact, be a promising first step on the way to building influence over an entire hospital.

ACQUIRING INFLUENCE

Clearly, influence in the field of psychology is a matter of swaying and suborning the right individuals. There is no specific psychological organization to which all practitioners report; the matter is really one of doing your research, figuring out who can accomplish what you want, and choosing the right doctor or therapist to suit your needs. Kind of like the kine themselves do.

If your primary concern is blackmail or shaping people in positions of power, your safest bet is to go

PLAYING DOCTOR

Psychology is one of the fields in which it might suit you to involve your character directly rather than working through proxies. If you're reasonably knowledgeable about psychology, there's no inherent reason that you yourself can't work as a therapist. You'll have to find a sound explanation for your odd hours, but the benefits of having your patients' secrets coming straight to you, of being able to mold them as you see fit without your desires being interpreted by an intermediary may well be worth the extra effort.

As a side note, if you plan to find work as a therapist, it is a poor idea to feed on your patients. Some of them are going to remember, and all it takes is one loss of control to royally screw up your practice. Dead bodies and vanishing patients don't make for good word of mouth.

In game terms, a character who wishes to work as a professional psychologist or social worker should have at least three dots of Psychology (this is a secondary Knowledge presented in the Guide to the Camarilla); a potential psychiatrist should have at least two, and probably three, dots of Medicine.

with a psychiatrist. While there is little intrinsic difference between seeing a psychiatrist or a psychologist, most rich people prefer the former. Psychiatrists are capable of prescribing any medications they might need without going through outside channels. More importantly, there's more prestige in seeing a therapist with a greater number of abbreviations after his name.

If your concern falls more along the lines of parapsychological studies (or any other study or research group, for that matter), a psychologist is probably the way to go. While most psychiatrists spend their time with patients, a great number of psychologists are involved in research or clinical study rather than therapy.

SUBCULTURES

They exist everywhere, in every industrialized nation in the world, so prevalent that many of them aren't even noticed anymore. Less a specific institution than an entire category of social entity all their own, subcultures run the gamut from the terrible to the terribly silly and back again. For every fad that survived in select pockets after it died off in the rest of the world, every alternative lifestyle embraced by more than three people, every group with an "us vs. them" mentality, there is a definable subculture attached. Some pursue a specific moral, social or political agenda.

Others just want to be left alone by the world at large and allowed to live their lives as they see fit. Some are relatively new elements of society; others have been around as long as they've had a culture to be separate from. About the only thing that all subcultures can be said to have in common is an overwhelming need to live their lives or regulate their behavior in some fashion that is alien to society at large.

Some of these subcultures aren't particularly germane to the topic at hand. Some things even the Kindred can't make much use of. Historical reenactment societies and Renaissance faire-goers aren't good for much as far as the Damned are concerned, except perhaps making a truly eccentric elder feel a little more at home. Goths are sometimes useful if you're trying to hide from a witch-hunter, since being pale won't exactly cause you to stand out. Then again, goths have little in the way of societal influence. The gay and lesbian subculture, while growing rapidly, doesn't yet wield enough real political clout to make it a prime target for Kindred influence, though more than a few powerful individuals involved in the movement are worth looking into.

Other subcultures and similar groups hold a great deal more power; occasionally, this comes in the form of political clout, but more often it's a result of specific talents or the sort of people that the group attracts. Because the details differ so drastically from subculture to subculture, no generalizations apply. What follows below, therefore, is a listing of a few of society's subcultures that might prove useful to an ambitious neonate, and a few pointers on how to ingratiate yourself with such people.

Remember, though, that even more than with the other institutions described above and in previous chapters, these are merely guidelines, not rules. Every one of these groups is different the others, even those that seem on the surface to be quite similar. Nothing — no techniques, no generalizations, no objectives, *nothing* — holds true to them all.

The following suggestions barely scratch the surface of what's out there. Hell, there are probably more subcultures and related organizations than there are Kindred. Remember, too, that not all similar subculture groups are linked. Influence with the Ku Klux Klan doesn't necessarily grant you any sort of pull with the skinheads.

Hackers

Hacking isn't just an activity, or even a hobby. For some among the fanatic computer geniuses, it's a way of life. One of the newest insular subcultures to appear in the landscape of human civilization, the hackers also have the interesting distinction of being one of the only such groups that almost doesn't exist

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

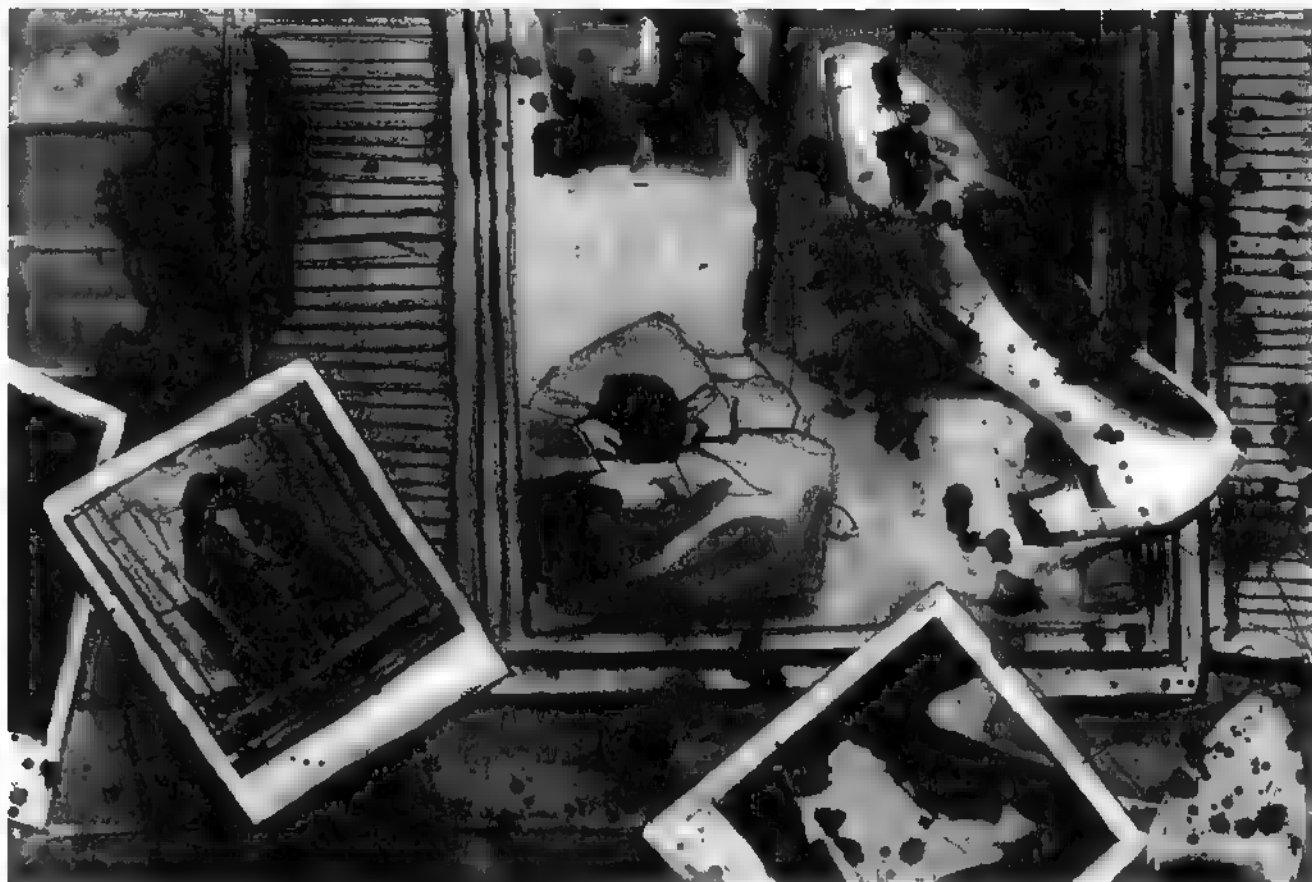
Trying to say that any given clan is more active in society's subcultures is like trying to say that a given clan is more active in society itself. It simply can't be done. Given the broad range of subcultures across the industrialized world, and the sheer number of such groups, sects and organizations, there is no way any clan could possibly hold a majority of the power in any given type of subculture.

The only generalization that can be drawn, and this is so broad as to be almost useless, is that the so-called "less social" clans tend to be more interested in the subcultures than the more politically oriented ones. The Ventrue have an unshakable foothold in the government, in big business, in high society. Few of them feel the need to involve themselves in organizations that are, by definition, less powerful. The Brujah, however, have always been more able than the Ventrue to see the power of the common man, and are thus more willing to throw their weight into smaller, grassroots organizations.

Less interest does not, of course, equate to no interest, especially among the neonates who don't yet have the same access to the corridors of power that their elders do. Some Ventrue and Toreador are involved in various subcultures around the world, just as Brujah and Gangrel are involved in corporations and political offices here and there.

in the "real" world at all. Most association and communication is through e-mail, messages on restricted boards, and trademark tags at the "scenes" of specific crimes. Piracy of heavily protected data and the creation of the newest unstoppable virus: These are symbols of status and prestige to the hacker elite of the world, and invaluable assets for the Kindred capable of infiltrating or joining that secretive electronic society.

The advantages to be gained through even mild influence in the hacker subculture almost go without saying. The ability to compromise or even destroy a rival's corporate database, or access the files of an official you're seeking to blackmail or extort can make the difference between success and failure. Few security systems can keep up with the constant rise in computer skill among the elite. Pirates have broken into the R&D files at Microsoft, and a violation of Pentagon security several years back was traced by the FBI to a teenage boy in India. And, because the public perception of hackers suggests that they choose their targets without rhyme or reason (even when this is not, in fact, the case), odds are that neither the



authorities nor your rivals are likely to connect their security breach to any concerted attack on their holdings or personnel.

Many hackers wage these Internet terrorist campaigns to showcase their disdain for authority. You therefore need to take care, when directing them against your chosen targets, that you don't make it obvious that your goal is to supplant the people or agencies that you're having the hackers undermine. Many of them will cease cooperating with you if they get the impression that you're just another stooge of the political and corporate elite. This means that, unless there's information in a rival company's database that you vitally need, you're safer setting up your opponents for viruses and other destructive incursions rather than theft of information. Devote too much effort to stealing data rather than crippling systems, and your hackers are going to start wondering why you need the information in the first place.

Militant Racist Organizations and Survivalist Groups

From one of the newest subcultures in the modern world, we turn to one of the oldest. After a dip in neo-Nazi groups worldwide, the number of people involved in these organizations is once again on the rise. Organizations such as the KKK and the Aryan Nation in the United States and the New Socialist

groups in Germany — that had seemed for a time to be on their way out — have resurfaced with a strength and membership unseen in years. Nor are all modern racist organizations devoted to white supremacy, though the vast majority of them may be. More than one group has sprung up among black Americans preaching hatred and violence toward all nonblacks, and anti-Israeli and anti-Palestinian fringe groups have experienced an enormous growth of power in both the governments and populace of their respective countries in the Middle East. Hatred is ever and always a widespread and valuable commodity, and even those Kindred who couldn't care less about a group's ideology can find ways to make use of its methods.

Often lumped in with such racist organizations, though they're not inherently the same thing, are the survivalist organizations and militias, consisting of individuals and groups who still believe in the eventual fall of government and civilization as we know it, and are determined to be fully prepared when it happens. Although usually less actively violent than the hate groups, these organizations can still get downright lethal when it comes to protecting their properties. Equipped with bomb shelters, generators, enough food to feed a nation for a year and enough artillery to wipe

out that same nation in an afternoon, defending their own interpretations of their rights is seemingly their whole purpose.

While some few of these groups have a small amount of political power, at least on the local level, the primary advantage to having connections and influence in such an organization is access to manpower and equipment. More than a few extremist groups, be they racist or survivalist, have contacts that can yield them all sorts of hardware and weaponry. And while it's true that the vast majority of the Damned have no real need for automatic weaponry, grenades, and so forth (and if you do, exactly what sort of Jihad are you playing?), there are occasions in which this sort of firepower might prove useful. If nothing else, you can serve as the supplier for your local sheriff or maybe even an archon (or for nomadic packs and crusaders, if your sympathies lie with the Sabbat rather than the Camarilla) and build up a few favors that way.

Weapons, of course, need people to point them at other people, and organizations like these are the perfect place to find them. Extreme racial supremacists and survivalists rarely have any moral objection to doing violence to those who oppose their cause, and practically anyone can be painted as the enemy with the right degree of slander and propaganda on your part. Entire cities have been taken from one sect by the other without more than a handful of Kindred actually so much as raising a finger. If you find yourself involved in circumstances demanding a heavily armed kine presence, this is an excellent source of raw materials.

People this violent can prove dangerous even to Kindred. Few of the Damned, especially neonates, can stand up to a barrage of high-caliber automatic fire. Do not ever let these people discover that you've got no interest in their philosophy and have been using them for your own ends. The results will be, in a word, painful.

Cults

What is a cult, really, but a subculture so tightly contained and insular that it has not only its own social structure, but its own religious structure as well? Some of these function in the heart of society, set aside only by their unusual behaviors and beliefs such as the Hare Krishna. Others isolate themselves physically as well as spiritually, to the point where they can be mistaken for the survivalist subtype mentioned above, such as the ill-fated Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas.

Unless a Kindred is able to acquire complete and unbreakable control over the head of a cult, she's probably better served by forming one from the ground up, one loyal to her personally.

I can't believe I'm saying this. Anyway...

Most cults are fanatically devoted to a specific individual, and it is almost impossible for even the most charismatic, irresistible Kindred to alter her focus in any long-term capacity. If you do seek to build a cult around you, be certain you do not reveal to the "faithful" that you're a Kindred. Those responsible for enforcing the Masquerade look on undead blood cults with no small amount of displeasure. This is not to say that you shouldn't take advantage of a radically loyal herd from whom to feed to your unbeating heart's content, but rather that you must find an excuse for taking their blood that doesn't involve you being an undead creature of the night. The "ingredient for mystic rituals" line often works for those whose belief exceeds their capacity for logical thought. You might try that one.

In addition to providing a convenient source of vitae, your own cult makes a wonderful financial tool. Moneys can be fed into it from all sorts of sources and laundered into legitimacy. The institution itself, as a religious and technically nonprofit organization, can be rendered tax-exempt with the proper paperwork. Gotta love that Form 501-C3.

The single most valuable asset of the cult, though, comes in the form of its members, and not just because they're all a bunch of walking refreshment stands for you. Any Kindred who can't think of at least a handful of uses for a dozen (or several dozen, or even several hundred, depending on the size of the cult) fanatically and religiously devoted kine, some of whom may well have contacts or authority you can take advantage of in the outside world, doesn't deserve any success in the Jihad at all.

ACQUIRING INFLUENCE

The biggest obstacle to building a base of power in modern subcultures is that most of these groups don't have any formal hierarchy of authority in which to insinuate yourself. There is no Hacker Central passing out assigned targets to its people worldwide. There is no Reich headquarters to which all neo-Nazi groups answer and swear allegiance. Influence in these sectors can be acquired only on a local basis.

Your next difficulty is to determine how best to get your foot in the door. If you wish to go about suborning someone, whom do you choose? Will blood bonding any specific hacker grant you any sort of pull with the others? And as far as the local KKK, who do you bribe or blackmail? You may be able to learn who the so-called Grand Wizard of the Klan may be, but odds are good that the local leaders don't go around publicizing their identities. Sometimes, the only way to truly acquire respect or authority in the field is to

do it yourself, but how many neonates have sufficient skills at hacking to grab the attention of others? How many have the resources and the charisma to found their own cult?

In the end, your best — and possibly only — solution is in-depth research to determine who the most respected members of any given subculture in your area might be, and what sorts of leverage you can use to get yourself an “in” with them. It’s not easy. It can, in fact, be more difficult than figuring out who best to target in a corporate or political setting. But the results are often worth the effort, if only because you’ll have gained influence in an area that your elders have most likely overlooked.

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

It’s worth reiterating that the above is just the smallest sampling of the unique permutations of kine civilization, entities and industries that are difficult to categorize and yet no less useful to the Kindred than corporations, crime families or ambitious politicians. Think creatively. If it sounds like something the Kindred would never consider getting involved in, it may actually be your best bet. Surprise your elders, surprise your rivals, surprise yourself. The potential rewards are great.

So are the risks, of course. But you’re undead, and you have forever, don’t you?



CHAPTER SIX: PULLING THE STRINGS

This section is intended for the Storyteller only. If you're a player, reading what's in here *probably* won't ruin the game for you. But ask your Storyteller first if she minds, okay? It's the polite thing to do.

Okay, Storytellers. You probably picked up *The Gilded Cage* for one of two reasons. One, you really want to run a political chronicle of some sort, and you intend to use the information in this book to make your game the best it can be. You drool with anticipation over the idea of watching your players go head-to-head with the city's long-entrenched elders, scrabbling and squabbling for every shred of influence, every contact, every pawn. Great; that's what the book's here for.

Others of you hadn't really intended to delve into this particular area, but one of your players bought this book before you realized what was happening, and now wants his Ventrue neonate to become the biggest power broker in the city. You don't want to discourage him by telling him "no" outright, but you don't have the first clue how to deal with it and grabbed up this book in self-defense. That's fine too.

You'll both find this book an invaluable aid for what you've got planned. But we're giving you an advantage your players don't have, simply because we like you so much (unless you've granted permission for them to read this section, or they ignored our above request). They only get to see how to best make use of these concepts on an individual level. This appendix — or at least the first portion of it — is designed to show you how to build an entire chronicle around the concepts presented throughout *The Gilded Cage*.

We can give you the single most important pointer right off the bat. All our advice is not for players — or players' characters — alone. Every single tidbit of advice, every strategy, every dirty trick and underhanded tactic can be used just as effectively by your Storyteller characters. Granted, some of the techniques should be outside the realm of an elder's expertise; a five-century-old vampire probably isn't going to be surfing the Net for stock tips. But they've already got their fingers in an uncountable number of pies, and they know all the tricks that don't rely on

mysterious newfangled technology. For that matter, who says that all of the characters' rivals are going to be elders? Your players certainly don't represent the city's only ambitious childer, do they?

Let your players try any technique or plan of attack they want. Many of them should even work. But don't let them walk all over everyone else. If the Camarilla was made up by nothing but senile old fogies who were easily bested by a gaggle of young whelps like your players' characters, it would have crumbled ages ago. Your players are going to, quite literally, throw every trick in the book at you; don't hesitate for one minute to pitch them right back.

A lot of Storytellers feel that it's somehow "wrong" of them to strip away the results of a character's hard work. Once one of the characters has managed to wrest a controlling interest in a company — or the city councilman's ear or the newspaper reporter's sympathy — away from the elder who held it, there's a temptation to let this state of affairs become the new status quo. It's not. The elder probably wants to reclaim what she lost, and even if she's out of the picture for good, others want exactly what the character has so recently acquired. The game has to be played both ways, or else it's just another slay-the-monsters dungeon crawl with metaphors for intrigue.

Don't be arbitrary in your rulings. Don't tell a player that his character has lost his shares of the company "just because" (unless learning how it happened is a major plot point, of course), and don't decide on a whim which attacks succeed and which don't. Give the player every chance to defend against his enemies' tactics, just as you (presumably) had your elders fight back against his political assaults. Decide who wins — both the battles and the war — based on roleplaying and story, not the luck of the draw, and stick with it once the decision's been made. If the players win, they win; if they lose, they lose. When the situation warrants it, take their toys away.

THEN AGAIN...

Maybe a certain five-centuries-old elder does use the Web to check financial advice.

The upshot is that rather than second-guess ourselves at every point, which would become redundant and painful to read, we'll let you make those decisions. Know when to play against archetype and stereotype if it suits the story. Don't be arbitrary — those archetypes and stereotypes come from somewhere — but give the players' characters a taste of their own medicine when it would be interesting to do so.

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Just like anything else that's worth doing, running a political chronicle requires a bit of work on the part of the Storyteller, particularly when it comes to preparation. You're going to have to know a lot more about your players' characters and Storyteller characters from the get-go than you would if your chronicle revolved around protecting the Masquerade or hunting Cathayans on the West Coast. Knowing what your city's elders can do isn't enough anymore; you also have to know how, why and with whom. And you've got to have that information available to you for every major player in town.

It's not as hard as it sounds.

STEP ONE: WHO'S ON THE FIELD?

This is actually the first step (and often the last) taken by many Storytellers when designing a chronicle, be it political or otherwise. It's a simple matter of deciding how many major players operate in your city, and who they are. This should be based largely on the nature and details of the story you want to tell. Is the city constantly threatened by the Sabbat? You'll probably want fairly strong leaders (unless you've got good reason to choose otherwise, of course). If, on the other hand, your city is located in a relatively stable part of the world and boasts an enormous art and party scene, the elders may consist mostly of decadent hedonists who have grave difficulty functioning in a crisis.

Example: Lynn decides that she is going to set her new Vampire chronicle in Houston, Texas. Houston is a large city, teeming with major industry. It is completely Camarilla-dominated, but it's also uncomfortably near Sabbat-infested Mexico. Furthermore, due to the large flow of drugs and illegal immigrants from Central and South America, the city boasts a thriving population of Setites (and, formerly, a small enclave of Ravnos, one of whom is still up and about).

Lynn decides that, because the situation seems to call for a strong prince to maintain order, she's going to go a different route. Lucas Halton of Clan Tremere is prince; he's no pushover, but he's also not up to the task of keeping the lid on this powder keg. Lynn decides that determining why the Tremere, who normally don't claim many princes among their number to begin with, are pushing to keep Halton in power will eventually become a major plot point of the chronicle, but not until the players have established their own bases of power. She also decides who the other big players are — primogen (several of whom are vying for Halton's seat), seneschal, sheriff, scourge and other Kindred who hold power and influence but no formal titles. She also has to decide who holds power outside Camarilla ranks — the big names among the local Setites, the Sabbat scout who's recently taken up residence in town and so forth. She ends up with a list of about a dozen important Storyteller

ALL THOSE DAMN VAMPIRES!

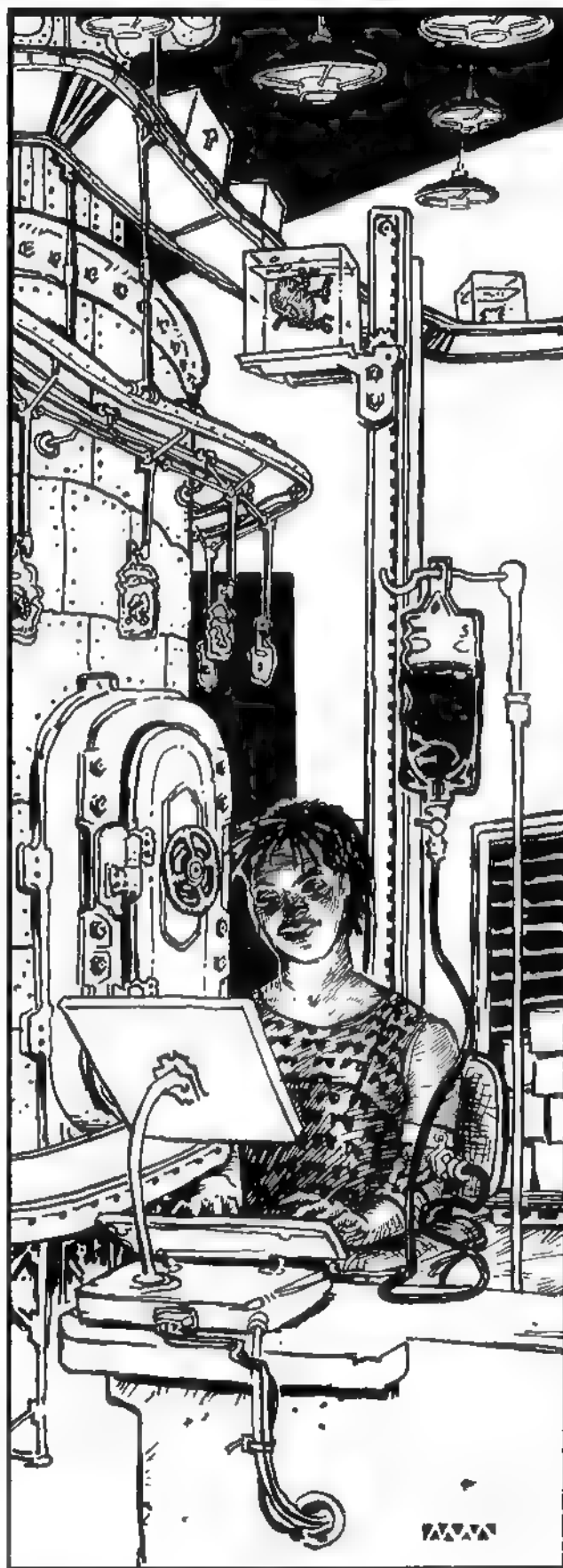
If you were to judge solely on the basis of many Vampire chronicles, you'd probably come to the conclusion that the Kindred are everywhere. The truth is, while the Kindred try to involve themselves in nearly everything, there just aren't that many of them. Don't forget the mortal bigwigs in your city. Most of the politicians and CEOs don't have vampires pulling their strings. Most crime bosses aren't fronting for a less human sort of parasite. Most people in power are still alive and have never even seen a Cainite.

To many of the Kindred (quite possibly including your players' characters), a mortal in a position of authority is nothing more than a tool waiting to be picked up and used by the first Lick that comes along. But most people with real power should inspire some amount of respect, Kindred or kine, if only because of what they can accomplish. Throw your players for a loop now and again. Let them come across a human adversary who they can't just walk over. When their start-up is bought out in a hostile takeover, their haven is condemned or they find themselves on the wrong end of a drive-by, it doesn't matter a whit whether the instigator of their troubles drinks coffee or vitae.

characters. Since the greater Houston area boasts four million inhabitants — a number that can safely support around 40 Kindred — she's still got plenty of room to play with if she wants to create new Storyteller characters later.

STEP TWO: WAYS AND MEANS

This is where the political game begins to diverge from other varieties of chronicle. Because the story is going to revolve around the players' attempts to build power for their own characters by taking it from others, it is vital that the Storyteller know just where her supporting characters' power resides. This means more than just saying "So-and-so has a lot of influence in the Third National Bank, the local archdiocese and the physics department at the university." You've got to determine exactly how that power is maintained. Is the character a part owner? A frequent contributor? Does he hold the CEO in thrall, or does he just blackmail the CEO's secretary and accounting division? Is this power a recent acquisition, or has it been built up through the years? What are the limits (if any) to what the character can truly accomplish in the given fields? If you don't have this information at your fingertips, you're going to be left saying, "Ummm..." with a stupid look on your face when your players ask, "So judging by what we learned rifling the files, can we



tell if forcing the board to vote Mr. Hibbens out will break the prince's hold on the company?"

You'll want to obtain this information from your players, as well. If they want to play in a political chronicle, they need to know exactly who their allies and contacts are, where their influence lies and what they can accomplish with it all. Remember that as soon as they begin making nuisances of themselves, the powers that be are going to start looking at them through a microscope. While they're busy researching the elder's contacts and connections, the elders are doing the same to them.

It's also important that you decide how much of this is common knowledge. Does the prince keep his involvement in Continental Airlines secret, or do all the Kindred of the city know they should go through him (or more likely his assistants or contacts) to arrange their travel itinerary? For that matter, how much "common knowledge" is actually true? Does the Setite Nathaniel King actually broker the vast majority of the cocaine that moves through Houston, or has he simply made such a splash that his reputation has exceeded reality? Is the prince really the dominant personality in Kindred society, or do the Nosferatu — who may have discovered the truth as to why the Tremere want this particular Kindred in charge — actually pull his strings by threatening to reveal his secret?

Example: Lynn goes down her list of Storyteller characters, deciding who they are as people, how they behave and what their motivations are. Then she comes to the meat of the issue — what sort of power do they hold, and how do they hold it? She's got a whole mess of characters to cover, but we're only going to look at one: Medea Burae, Ventrue primogen.

Lynn already knows that Medea was born during the Renaissance, and that she spent most of the 18th and 19th centuries in torpor. She's been awake for most of the 20th century — more than enough to have a pretty solid grasp of the way society tonight operates (though she still prefers to avoid some of the modern era's higher-tech accouterments). Lynn knows a lot more than just this about the Ventrue's history, but most of it is irrelevant to our discussion.

What matters here is Medea's current situation. Lynn decides that she wants Medea's strongest areas of influence to be in pharmaceuticals, hospitals and healthcare, followed by banking, with a few select contacts in government and one or two well-placed agents in city services.

Lynn decides that Medea owns one pharmaceutical company outright, through a handful of false identities. Her oldest ghoul, Adam, is on the board of directors of a second company and has enough blackmail material on the other members to guarantee that nearly every vote goes the way she wants. Medea knows that if anything happens to Adam, her authority with this second company will be severely curtailed; thus, she's currently attempting to suborn a larger

number of the corporation's support staff. She hasn't gotten very far with this yet, as it's a fairly new undertaking.

Considering the sheer amounts of capital that corporations like hers generate, Medea felt it wise to develop some contacts within the banking industry. She deliberately chose a smaller bank, one that would see substantial growth and benefits once they picked up her account. She now holds that leverage like a hammer, threatening to withdraw her funds if the bank president isn't willing to do her an occasional favor. Of course, she compensates the man generously when he cooperates (he would, for instance, have only been able to afford a two-story house without her assistance), ensuring that he doesn't think of her with purely ill will.

Medea's position as the owner of a pharmaceutical corporation also allows her access to the administration of one of Houston's largest hospitals. By donating enormous sums of cash to keep the hospital going, she has bought the goodwill of the owners. As added insurance, she keeps the hospital's most prestigious surgeon on retainer by covering up the drugs he steals to support his own habit, and she's recently begun bribing one of the accountants to keep her apprised of the hospital's fiscal status.

Medea was able to parlay her power at the hospital into political leverage when the wife of a United States senator was flown in to see a specialist. She took the opportunity to meet the senator himself and became one of his largest campaign contributors. By now, he depends a great deal on her generosity when every sixth November rolls around. Medea also, through her pharmaceutical connections, has the ability to cut off the senator's wife's supply of medication, though that's a card she's never had to play. The police captain she has on a leash downtown was also a result of her hospital connection. Back when he was a detective, he was brought in with a gunshot wound. Medea covered his expenses while he was there and also took the opportunity to form a more substantial form of bond with the man, figuring that a police detective — and eventually captain — was worth maintaining as a ghoul.

Lynn now knows exactly where Medea focuses her power, how she built each connection up from the last — and how to react if the players move against her. She knows Medea's strengths and weaknesses, and can allow the characters to slowly unearth that information if they look hard enough. For instance, Medea has a tendency to rest her power on a specific individual — Adam the ghoul, for example, or the president of the bank. If something were to remove either of them from the picture before she succeeds in putting her fallback plans in place, she might find herself severely weakened in certain industries. Furthermore, her level of influence at the hospital, while nothing to scoff at, isn't as strong as it seems. Her power over the surgeon has no real impact on the hospital administration, and there's a limit to what they'll allow, regardless of the size of her donations. On the other hand, her control over her own

company and dominance of the police captain are rock-solid; the players are better advised to focus elsewhere when whittling away at her base of power. These are the sorts of details Lynn will need to have at hand, not just for Medea, but for all her important characters.

STEP THREE: POWER PLAY

Now that you know who has what influence, the next question on the list is, who *wants* what influence? The players' characters probably aren't the only covetous Kindred in the city. Other schemes and grabs for leverage should be constant and ongoing, regardless of what activities currently occupy the players' attention. Is someone making an active bid to overthrow the prince? How is it being done? Are the prince's allies being bought out from under him, or has the rival simply begun sabotaging his holdings and companies? Is anybody else making a play for the same prize the players are? Is anybody attempting to yank away one of the players' characters' contacts while she's distracted with

BACKGROUND AS FOREGROUND

Some Storytellers don't worry about Traits and dots for their supporting cast, figuring they'll make them up later if they need them. Others want every Storyteller character, from the prince to that cab driver the players keep running into, to have every Attribute, Ability and Discipline allotted and written down in advance.

Either of these techniques is fine, of course, but you should seriously consider skipping the specific dots of Background in a political chronicle. Give your elders whatever connections and leverage they need to make them more challenging opponents and to construct a better story. Don't worry about limiting them to the "proper" number of dots in Backgrounds. It doesn't matter if Medea Burae has three dots in Influence or six dots (she's an elder, remember?) in Resources. It *does* matter that she can call in favors from one of the city's fastest growing banks, two corporations and the captain of a downtown police precinct if you start messing with her hospital connections. This is definitely a time to let the story, rather than the rules, hold the reins.

When we publish Traits for a given character, that's only to give you a sense of how much that character has to draw upon. Even then, we cheat — we don't bother assigning points to the Generation Background; the character simply is what generation he is. You should extrapolate a similar method for your chronicles, because you're going to need far more in-depth context than a few dots can provide, given the nature of the political chronicle.

other things? The political environment is dynamic, constantly changing. The players cannot focus merely on their own goals. If they don't pay attention to what everybody else is doing around them, they may lose three contacts for every one they gain.

The flip side of this is to decide who wants services the other Kindred can provide. Who owes boons to whom? If the characters are trying to steal a corner church away from another vampire, for instance, can that vampire call on the Toreador primogen for help because he's allowed the primogen to hunt in his domain, or because he saved her favorite childe from a Lupine? If Medea Burae helped the prince out of a jam 12 years ago, the players may find they face more than they bargained for if she calls on him to repay the debt by assisting her against the characters.

It may be useful to "flowchart" the web of boons and favors, or the web of goals, plots and counterplots among the Storyteller characters, in much the same way as other books have suggested diagramming coterie ties. Having it on paper in front of you can make the seemingly daunting task of keeping track of all this a lot easier.

Example: Lynn knows that Medea Burae does not actually want to be prince. She is content to remain a lesser target for ambitious Kindred. She likes power, though, so she's determined to wrap the prince so firmly in a web of prestation that he'll have no choice but to dance when she moves her fingers. At the same time, she knows that Thomas Youngblood, another local Ventrue, has interests not only in becoming prince, but in taking over Medea's medical interests as well. Regardless of what the players start off doing, Lynn already knows that Medea is busy warding off various gambits Youngblood has initiated. At the same time, though Medea knows that Youngblood is also moving against the prince's interests, she has chosen to stand aside for the moment. She will wait and see what happens. If Prince Halton succeeds in putting down Youngblood, that gets him off Medea's back as well without her committing any of her own resources to the task. If the prince finds himself in real trouble, however, she can swoop in and aid him against a "common threat," thus dragging Halton even further into her debt. What Lynn knows, but Medea does not, is that Prince Halton has become aware of her intentions via a few choice words dropped by the Nosferatu....

These plots do not necessarily have to come to a head at any point in the chronicle, and the players may not even be aware of most of them. By deciding this sort of thing in advance, however, Lynn knows precisely how a player victory over one of her supporting characters will affect the entire structure. She knows as well who is likely to oppose the players' characters, and who is more likely to offer their assistance.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!

Don't overdo this. If you start building too many interconnected webs, too many schemes, too many wheels-within-wheels-within-wheels, your head's going to spin. There's only so much a human being — even a Storyteller — can be expected to keep track of. The point is to give you some idea of Kindred relations and goals, not to document each and every ongoing endeavor down to its finest detail. Don't feel you have to know everything that every one of your Storyteller characters has going at every given moment. If you have even a vague idea as to the nature of, say, one to three schemes for each of the major players, that's more than sufficient.

That should just about do it. The Storyteller can certainly consider other details that need to be in any **Vampire** chronicle — not specifically political stories — such as plot events and the distribution of clues and red herrings. Follow the steps above, in addition to whatever normal preparations you normally undertake before beginning your chronicle, and you should be fully prepared to keep up with (or even ahead of) your players regardless of what direction they jump in their grab for power.

PLAYING FAVORITES

You've been running one hell of a chronicle. You're having a blast and your players are having a blast, too. You can't wait to get together every Saturday and break out the characters and the dice. You've got horror, you've got mystery, you've got intrigue, you've got action. After months of piecing together clues and undercutting influence, your players finally have that damn elder where they want her. She's been toying with them from the first night they met her, and now it's finally time to take her out of the picture. It may be with the swirl of a pen, the mandate of the prince or the discharge of a shotgun, all depending on what sort of story you're telling, but whatever the case, she's finally out of their hair.

Except you don't want to see her go.

Storytellers become attached to their favorite Storyteller characters, just like players do to their own favorite characters. There's nothing wrong with that; it's a normal, human reaction. It does become a problem, though, when you start compromising the story in order to keep her around.

The Storyteller should never forget that it is the players' characters, not the Storyteller characters, who are the focus of the story. If you set the story up so that

the players must remove or eliminate one of your supporting cast to succeed in their goals, you must allow them — eventually — to do just that.

Most experienced Storytellers know better than to fudge things to keep a favorite supporting character around past her time. But in a political chronicle, odds are that you're not going to see your favorites killed off. You're far more likely to seem the crushed, humbled, stripped of their status. It can, in a way, be worse.

But you must allow it. Compromising the game to prevent a favorite from being cut down a few pegs is no less damaging than doing it to keep them from Final Death. If you can't stand to see a Storyteller character taken down, don't incorporate her into the plot at all. No one's asking you to make things easy on your players, but if they have no chance to succeed because you've already taken sides, you might as well close the rule books and take up Monopoly. At least there you're supposed to be working against everyone else.

BACKGROUNDS REVISITED

In a discussion of how best to set up a political chronicle, we would be remiss if we didn't take a closer look at these useful yet often overlooked Traits. Backgrounds represent the starting point for beginning characters, the only advantages they have in a vicious, intrigue-filled arena of rivals who have had years, if not centuries, to claw their way ahead.

Vampire: The Masquerade describes Backgrounds as Traits that "describe the advantages of birth (or rebirth), circumstances and opportunity: material possessions, social networks and the like." Sounds precisely like what **The Gilded Cage** is about, doesn't it? But the main text also states that "you should always rationalize how you came to possess them, as well as what they represent." That's a step that's often glossed over in some chronicles, but it's of vital importance here. As with the Storyteller characters above, the characters must not only know what they can do, but how, and who they have to work through to do it.

The Storyteller of a political chronicle should always feel free to limit the players' starting options if she wants them to begin beneath a certain level of function. You may choose not to forbid any Backgrounds outright, but if you don't want anyone to begin with an Influence of higher than 2, or no more than 4 Resources, that's entirely your prerogative.

Since they are so essential to a political campaign, let's take a closer look at some of those Backgrounds. Presented below, you'll find clarifications, suggestions and variations intended to spice up your chronicle without changing the balance of power. Obviously, if

you've chosen to assign Background dots to your Storyteller characters, this all applies to them as well as to the players' characters.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

These Backgrounds don't exist in a vacuum. Everything has an impact on everything else, and this needs to be taken into consideration when creating your characters, whether you're a player or the Storyteller.

This starting character's going to have five dots of Contacts? That's nice; how's he paying them for their cooperation when he's got no Resources? How did this other Kindred manage to achieve an Influence of 3 — a factor in regional politics — without making a single ally or contact along the way? Your neonate's got a Status of 3 already? Where'd she get it? Her sire? Why doesn't she have a Mentor Trait, then?

This is of particular import in a political story, but it really ought to be a consideration for any chronicle. Characters should make sense. Just because you didn't have to play through a character's accumulation of Backgrounds, since it happened prior to you putting dots on the sheet, that doesn't mean their acquisition didn't occur logically. Again, this isn't a carved-in-stone mandate; if player and Storyteller can agree on a perfectly good justification as to how a character managed to build up a Background with no points of other, apparently related, Backgrounds, that's fine. None of the Background allocations above are unfair, they simply provoke questions to be answered. Most of the time, though, the Storyteller should insist that such things make sense, and she is even within her rights to require that Backgrounds that are "related" (in her opinion) have starting levels that are within one or two dots of each other.

ALLIES

The primary advantage that allies have over contacts is one of willingness to help. These are friends, family or others who feel some amount of loyalty to you. Note the word "loyalty." Anyone who's been coerced into helping you — no matter how thorough the coercion — is probably better classified as a contact, or maybe even under the umbrella of the Influence Background. Someone tied to you by the blood bond is more accurately considered a retainer, even if they don't work directly under you.

And yet allies are more than just people willing to help you out. Most of us have a great many friends — enough, at least, to sit around a table and play a storytelling game, and probably a lot more. Yet how many of us can honestly claim a high Allies Trait? The rules give guidelines as to how useful your allies are, based on your score in the Background — but really,

what does "quite influential" mean, anyway? And what if you want someone who is more influential than your dots would indicate, but he's harder to reach? What if your ally is an organization, but you happen to have the new employee on the phone who doesn't know who you are? Is this a friend from your days as a mortal who doesn't know you've changed, or is it someone who's anxious to help you out because you helped get her where she is tonight? In a political chronicle, why someone is an ally is just as important as who he is. Consider all of this when choosing (or approving) allies, and remember as well that individual allies are going to call on the characters for help and favors, not just the other way around.

What follows is a system for reinterpreting the Allies Background. While the core rulebook assumes one ally per level of Allies, a higher level of the Background may signify a more competent individual, while a lower score might indicate great potential but rare availability.

Moderate influence and power (Allies 1 and 2): People who have either a great deal of pull in a very limited arena or a small amount of clout in a larger sphere. The owner of a tiny start-up firm, a clerk in a city government office, a reporter at the local paper, a beat cop, a corner dealer or a wage-slave employee of a large corporate entity who can do little more than report office rumors or open the door for you after hours. Alternatively, someone who's "quite influential" but extremely difficult to get a hold of.

Quite influential (Allies 3): People who hold sway over a number of smaller entities or have begun to rise up the chain of command. A vice-president of a local company, a city councilman, the dean of a department at a university, a powerful attorney, a county judge, the editor of a small local paper, the leader of a street gang, a homicide detective or the head clergyman of a large, rich congregation. This could also apply to someone who better qualifies as "very influential," but is very nearly impossible to reach and only willing to help out in select circumstances.

Very influential (Allies 4): These people have some impressive power in the local scene and can often make things happen with a phone call. The head of an entire city department, the CEO of a local company or a VP at a national one, the captain of a police precinct, the owner or publisher of a TV station or newspaper, the city's largest law firm, a local Mafia don or the city's wealthiest industrialist. Alternatively, someone of "extreme influence" who, perhaps for reasons of public perception, will help you out only in dire circumstances.

Extremely influential (Allies 5): Some of the most powerful friends you could possibly have, these people

run the show, as much as anyone does. The mayor, the president of a large corporation, the police chief of the entire city, a federal judge, a single congressman or senator, someone in the administration of a national wire service or the leader of a drug cartel.

You'll have noticed that most allies are limited in scope to the local arena. If you want authority outside your immediate vicinity, you probably want to combine Influence and Allies, or consider elder-level Allies Traits (assuming you can have them).

CONTACTS

It's worth stating from word one that contacts and allies are not interchangeable. Your allies want to help you out; your contacts, by and large, couldn't care less unless they're earning something from the deal. You might pay them, you might threaten them, you might blackmail them — but they're working with you out of some sense other than friendship and obligation. The downside to this is that they're not likely to do as much for you as a well-placed ally, but this is mitigated by the fact that you've probably got a lot more contacts, and they're not going to be calling on you for favors (well, not often, at any rate). Even your major contacts, though they usually prove reliable, aren't as concerned with your well-being as are your allies. They're not going to stick their neck out for you under any circumstances.

Contacts are informants; they *tell*, they don't *do*. This is the snitch on the street, the secretary whispering over the phone or the governor's aide sneaking out of the reception to tell you what's being said inside. They might occasionally take a bit more of an active role, such as arranging a buy or a meeting for you, or serving as a messenger or errand boy, but they're not going to pull strings or call in favors the way an ally would.

When deciding who your major contacts are, you'll most likely want them spread throughout all strata of society. It doesn't do you much good to have three contacts who are all in the news services; odds are you'll be getting three reports on the same information. If you've got one at a wire service, one in the mayor's office and a neighborhood dealer, you've got a much wider array of information coming in to you. "Major" does not, in this case, refer to a contact's position in society in the same way that allies are categorized. A major contact is one who knows the character relatively well, one who is willing to give detailed and relatively reliable information (assuming his price is met, if he charges one).

Contacts don't necessarily have to be individuals, per se. Perhaps your Contacts 3 doesn't really indicate three major connections. Maybe you've got a larger handful of people, but they travel frequently,

and you've only got three "dots' worth" in town at any given time. Maybe you consult a small organization as a single contact, because it's not very effective and can only assemble one contact's worth of information. Don't feel constrained by the letter of the rules here; be creative.

As for minor contacts, the Storyteller should be very conservative when it comes to the information these people can provide. They give hints, snippets of data, overheard conversations — enough to set the players moving in the right direction, but not enough to solve any of their problems. These are "minor" contacts for a reason; if there's no functional difference between them and the "major" ones, why are the players going to bother defining their major contacts at all? A Storyteller is also within her rights to decide that a character has no minor contacts in a certain industry or area if all his attentions have been focused elsewhere. A character whose allies and contacts are all involved with the city's rich and famous would certainly have to provide a reasonable rationale for a minor contact among the "common people" in the housing projects.

FAME

Fame is really a double-edged sword. For all the privilege and power it brings, it's also a dangerous line to walk. Not only the unlife of the character in question, but also the very fabric of the Masquerade itself, is laid on the line every time one of the Kindred becomes a public spectacle. It's possible to maintain a public persona without appearing in daylight, eating in public or doing anything else the throngs of adoring fans and the paparazzi expect of you, but it's not easy. And when everybody's favorite local musician suddenly goes apeshit and begins ripping apart the audience — well, let's just say it becomes even more problematic.

Famed Kindred also face another danger (like they needed another one). Just because the public at large doesn't recognize certain patterns in a celebrity's behavior doesn't mean that nobody does. The Inquisition watches television, too. It's a lot more likely to recognize a vampire for what she is, and if you think they won't burn down your haven because you happen to be on the cover of TV Guide, you don't really know them at all.

One of the areas of influence in which fame is going to prove helpful, however, is in high society. It's not particularly useful in the corporate sector, endorsements aside. It's useful for politicians, but chances are that most characters' and Storyteller characters' political aspirations are under-the-table affairs. And you sure as hell don't want your face in the papers or on TV if you're connected with

organized crime. In a heavily political chronicle, Fame is a Background you'll enjoy as a challenge, unless your character really is a social player above and beyond all other concerns.

It's possible to mix and match the different levels of Fame to achieve a desired effect. What if you want a character to be a big name in a relatively select subculture? Normally, more dots in Fame indicate both a wider range of recognition (local, national, etc.) and a greater degree of recognition (what portion of the population knows who you are). If you prefer, however, you might choose to go for range without degree, or vice versa, and spend fewer dots. The actor Bruce Campbell, for instance, has appeared in a large number of movies that are cult favorites but were far from box-office success stories. Chances are that a relatively small percentage of people on the street would recognize him out of a crowd, or know his name if they heard it — yet his fame is certainly widespread, for those who would recognize him can be found throughout the world (*Army of Darkness* was quite popular in Japan). Thus, he might be assigned, say, three levels of Fame — known internationally, but only by a relatively small group.

HERD

As useful as this Background is, it can also prove dangerous in the extreme. Almost by definition, a

herd is a violation of the Masquerade, and the bigger the herd, the bigger the violation. You might be able to hide the drinking of vitae behind other activities. Maybe you've spawned a blood cult, and your worshippers believe they're sacrificing blood to a higher power. Perhaps you've managed to draw together a group of fetishists, for whom bleeding is part of the sex act alongside the whips and rubber masks. It could be that you feed from a select group of junkies — perhaps you're even their supplier (of course, if you're drinking from people who are high or stoned all the time, you're going to have certain liabilities). Maybe you've even enthralled a group of deluded teens who believe they really are vampires and exchange blood on a regular basis.

This sort of thing can mask a herd for quite some time, but sooner or later, someone's going to notice. Whatever you want to call it, whatever face you put on it, these are people who permit you to drink their blood. That screams "vampire" loudly enough, even in this modern, cynical world, that it makes princes nervous.

If you are going to keep a herd, it behooves you to keep them hidden. Play with the definitions a bit. What if you've got a small pack of wild dogs that live on the edge of town that you feed from regularly? Animal blood isn't all that filling, so you've got to have more than three dogs to indicate the equivalent



of one level of Herd. Maybe you've got a contact at a local hospital who can occasionally slip you a bag from the blood bank; that might happen just often enough to count as a level of the Herd Background. Or maybe your herd is far larger than the dots would suggest, but only a handful of them can be reached at any given time. Perhaps they're homeless and thus harder to find, or maybe several of your herd work as flight attendants for an airline and are only in town two nights a week.

It's also possible to combine Herd with other Backgrounds like Contacts or Allies. Maybe one of the people you feed from — carefully! — is also your informant in city hall. This can be dangerous, of course, since you lose twice as much if something happens to this individual. At the same time, you've got fewer relationships to keep track of, and that's one fewer person who can accidentally spill your secrets.

INFLUENCE

At its heart, Influence is what **The Gilded Cage** is all about. If you want a character to start with dots in Influence, define them — precisely. The character can pull strings in the local government? How? Which people does she know, and what sort of hold does she have over them? Can she put in a call to the governor and have a pardon issued? Why is that? What hold does she have over him? Maybe her Influence is combined with an ally, who happens to be very highly positioned. Perhaps her resources and her influence both come from her ownership of the same corporations.

Again, dots don't have to denote degrees of authority as directly as the rules suggest. Two dots normally indicate "a force in state politics." It might, however, indicate a vampire who is still involved only at the city level, but has even more leverage and power than a Kindred with Influence 1. A Kindred with Influence 5 may be a factor in global politics, not because he has his hand in multiple governments, but because he's highly connected in both the Catholic Church and several multinational corporations, both of which can pull strings across the world.

Influence cannot exist by itself. Vampires don't simply accrue authority as they age, as though they had some sort of social interest rate. In a political game, every last bit of influence must be defined, as it was for Medea Burae in the example above. This Background, even more than others, should be limited by Storytellers who want their games to focus on gaining — well, influence.

What does each dot mean, exactly? What leverage does the character hold? Over whom does she hold it? How did she gain it? What are its limitations? Define, define, define!

MENTOR

As one of the more straightforward Backgrounds, this needs less discussion than most. Unless the characters end up trying to drag their mentors into whatever mess they've involved themselves in — or unless a devious Storyteller sets the players against their mentors' interests without them realizing it — this Trait won't come into play any differently in a political story than it does in other chronicles (though it may come up more, as characters request favors). If it does become important, though, consider once again that the dots need not translate as literally as they do in the main text. Perhaps Mentor 4, rather than indicating the prince of the city, indicates two separate members of the primogen, both of whom consider the character a protégé.

If the players attempt to call on their mentors for aid, remember how the balance of power in the city affects those involved. Mentors are not likely to aid the characters at the expense of their own interests, and if the players are making a grab for power that threatens their mentors' current standing, they may refuse to help, or even actively oppose the players' characters.

Resources

Also pretty cut and dried, it is nevertheless vital in a political chronicle that each character determine exactly where his income originates. Does he own substantial interest or stock in large companies? Is his ghoul the owner of a successful law firm? Is he skimming proceeds from several charities? Does he take kickbacks in exchange for pulling strings on behalf of others? Does he actually hold down — gasp! — a job? Does he simply come from a truly wealthy family?

Resources need not come from funds that technically belong to the character at all. If one of the Kindred is able to regularly siphon funds from his own corporation or interests — money that is not technically his, but is owned by an entity that he, in turn, owns — that can factor into resources as well. Resources, ultimately, refers to capital the character can access, not necessary what's in his name.

The almighty dollar can open a lot of doors, but it is not a panacea. Rich characters will not be able to buy their way out of all their quandaries. Rare as they seem to be, some individuals can't be bought. And funds can be traced by rivals — or law enforcement — whose attentions the characters have unfortunately drawn. Assets can be seized, stolen or destroyed. Furthermore, having the money in hand doesn't grant one the connections to buy everything under the sun — er, moon. Very few people, no matter how loaded, can get their hands on heavy artillery or on the records kept by Mafia bookkeepers. Many players fall into the unfortunate habit of thinking that a rich character can solve anything with a

wave of his wallet. The Resources Background is a tool like any other — useful, but not infallible.

This Background can often be used to justify others. A character with significant monies can reasonably maintain more contacts by paying them, and perhaps even more influence (maybe he makes exceptional contributions to someone's campaign fund). Don't let this Background be abused, but don't forbid your players from exploiting it to its fullest potential, either.

RETAINERS

Our narrator said it best in the Society chapter — you probably need a ghoul. In this sort of chronicle or story, with so much going on around the characters, even the most skillful Kindred — or player, at that — is going to need some help keeping track of it all. Retainers prove invaluable here, making connections, running errands, handling details and just generally making existence easier for her "master."

The Retainers Background, much like Herd, can often be combined with others to great effect. Yes, your ally on the board of Crichton-Lawler is useful. How much *more* useful is she, though, if she's also one of your loyal helpers beyond the confines of the typical ally? You've already decided to have your ghoul function as your go-between for your dealings with your contacts on the street, but that ghoul's going to do an even better job if he's someone from the streets himself, maybe even someone who used to be just another of your low society contacts. Or perhaps you get a large portion of your resources from an underling, bound by your blood, who also happens to be a multimillionaire. Don't put all your eggs in one basket, of course, but some amount of consolidation of Backgrounds is a good thing.

STATUS AND SABBAT STATUS

Your reputation among the other Kindred of your city wouldn't seem to have too great an impact on your dealings with mortal institutions, would it? After all, whether or not the elders know your name or the harpies approve of your ensemble has no bearing on how much influence you hold over a bank, a newspaper or the Department of Public Works.

The truth is, reputation in Kindred circles and success in mortal affairs are often more tightly intertwined

than most neonates — and many ancillae — realize. Success in a character's endeavors can certainly increase her status among her fellow vampires, if those endeavors are sufficiently impressive. But most characters in a political chronicle will be more concerned — at least at first — with how their status (or lack thereof) is going to hamper their efforts at building a base of power.

First, a clarification regarding the Status Background as it is presented in the *Vampire: The Masquerade* rules. The examples given to represent each dot are just that — examples. They refer to averages and tendencies, not ironclad rules. Most princes of notable cities have Status 5, and the majority of neonates have Status 1. It doesn't mean all princes have 5, and it certainly doesn't mean that you gain a Status of 1 just for being Embraced, or even for being presented to the prince. Nor does it mean that a highly respected neonate can't have more than Status 1. Status rarely comes simply with age; it's got to be earned through word and deed, or at least inherited from a well-respected sire.

When you choose your political arena and make your first move, the odds are good that you'll have other Kindred to deal with. As discussed throughout the previous chapters, every area of mortal endeavor has vampires already firmly ensconced in the shadows, and your characters are going to have to dislodge them before you can take their place. Need allies to help work against them? Better have the status to make them treat you seriously. And you better build that status even higher once you've established your presence on the political field, if you hope to have the clout to ward off the future upstarts who are going to try to do to you what you did to your predecessors.

Never underestimate, however, the distinct advantage of remaining unknown. Those elders who are in power are far less likely to view you as a viable threat if you're flying beneath their social radar. The closer you are to their level of notoriety, the closer they're going to watch you. A neonate with even moderate status might be caught red-handed attempting to execute the same scheme that an anonymous Caitiff could pull off without a hitch, simply because the elders never once thought a lowly Caitiff could pose a hazard.



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